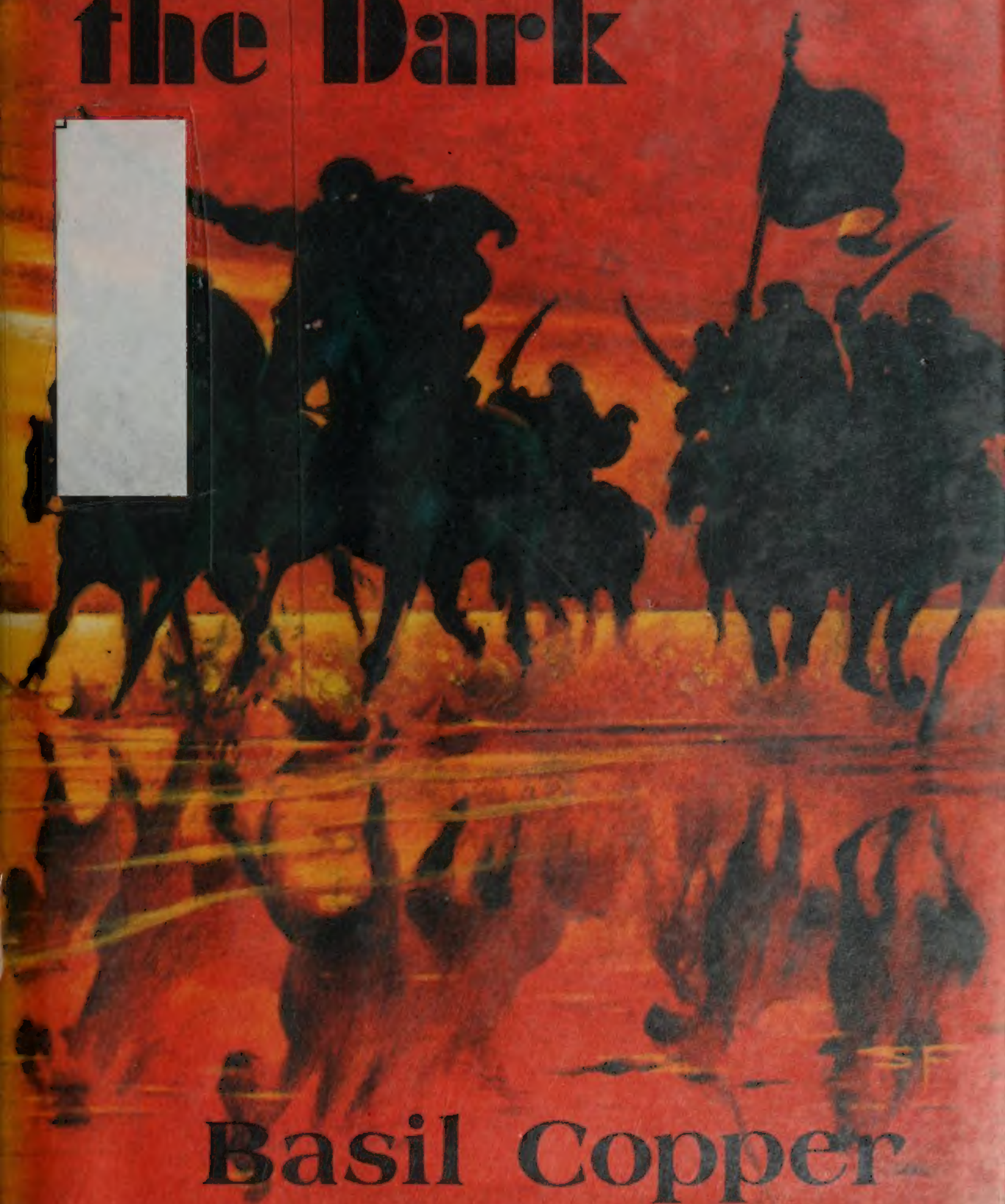


And Afterward, the Dark



Basil Copper

And Afterward, the Dark

The literature of darkness holds a haunting immediacy for most readers. The life of man, after all, is but a brief interval between one darkness and another, while the world he inhabits is likewise merely an ephemeral flicker within a universe enshrouded by perpetual night. As each finite being runs its course, then afterward comes the dark.

Basil Copper has explored this grimly somber realm of human reality with a sensitivity and skill that is almost unparalleled among the fantasy writers of our age. All seven tales in *AND AFTERWARD, THE DARK* treat the subject of death, but in each instance this common theme has been magically transmuted through the incomparable alchemy of Copper's marvelous macabre imagination.

In *The Janissaries of Emilion* death emerges from the realm of nightmare, as a troop of ancient horsemen thunder into the waking world to wreak sanguinary vengeance upon a man of the present day. The Tyrolean countryside forms the setting for *The Cave*, in which the terror-stricken inhabitants of a village inn are besieged by a malignly lurking, viciously predatory monster. The more subtly sinister, albeit equally devastating torments of a Satan cult are revealed through the *Archives of the Dead*, while in the futuristic world of *The Flabby Men*, a scientific research station is beleaguered by umbrageous entities spawned from the depths of a poisoned planet.

From the misty-spired city of medieval Emilion to the radiation-scarred landscape of the twenty-first century, Basil Copper has conceived a vision of darkness and death, and cultivated that vision with such awesome artistry and imagination as to entitle his works to a classic status among the literature of the macabre.

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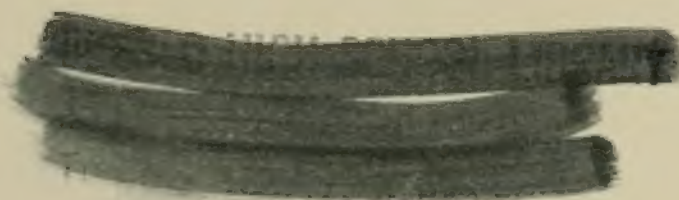
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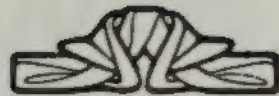
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AND AFTERWARD, THE DARK

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And Afterward, the Dark



BOOKS BY *Basil Copper*

Not After Nightfall

From Evil's Pillow

The Great White Space

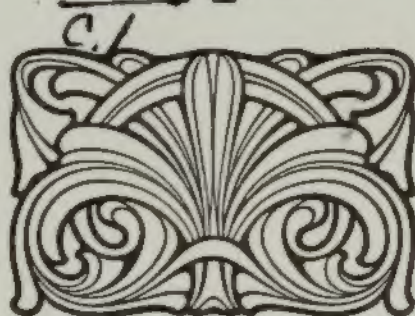
When Footsteps Echo



**And
Afterward,
the Dark**

seven tales

by
**Basil
Copper**



**ARKHAM HOUSE
1977**

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International Standard Book Number 0-87054-079-3
Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 77-078594

Book design by Jason Van Hollander

Contents

*Twilight and evening bell,
And after that the dark.*

TENNYSON

Report on the 1884 season's work

The season's work was very successful. The first part of the season was spent in the field, and the second part in the laboratory. The results of the field work are given in the following table. The results of the laboratory work are given in the following table.

Table 1. Results of the field work.

Table 2. Results of the laboratory work.



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Introduction

When, toward the end of his life, General Smedley D. Butler was giving his energies to a campaign intended to keep his country out of World War II, he used to say that the best introduction he ever had as a speaker was from an old farmer in the corn belt who held forth as follows: "Ladies and gentlemen, I haf to introduce General Smedley Butler, who vill to you a speech make. Dis I haf now done, and dis he vill now do."

In "introducing" this new volume by Basil Copper (but who, then, will introduce me?), I fear I cannot quite reach the old farmer's level, but it is always well to have an ideal in the mind's eye toward which one can aspire.

It is not of course as though Arkham House readers were now encountering Mr. Copper for the first time. That "introduction" was effected in 1973 with *From Evil's Pillow*, which was also his first book to be published in the United States, though there are many others in his native England, more of which have been devoted to the adventures of his own Sherlock Holmes, Mike Faraday, than to the stories of the supernatural, which, one would gather, lie closest to his heart.

All seven of the tales in *And Afterward, the Dark*, as well as the five in *From Evil's Pillow*, deal with death. The last and by all means the longest tale in the new volume, "The Flabby Men," I should call science fiction; the others exemplify older and more orthodox forms of supernaturalism. Machinery is important, however, in "Camera Obscura," as it was also in "A Very Pleasant Fellow" in the earlier collection, and I should say that both "Camera Obscura" and *Evil's* "Amber Print," which revolves around an enchanted and finally lethal version of one of the most seminal of all the great German films of the late teens and twenties, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, serve to remind us that Mr. Copper is an authority on the silent film. (Is this, I wonder, the very best story that has ever been written about a motion picture? It certainly cannot have many competitors.)

The reader of supernatural stories can hardly expect to be made quite as comfortable as the reader of, say, New England local color tales, for though there are of course benevolent as well as malevolent ghosts, ghostly society still strains the nerves by breaking through the comfortable barriers which fence off the world in which we feel most at home and whose laws alone we enter even a modest claim to understand from the rest of the mysterious, undisclosed universe. It is a mistake nevertheless to use ghost stories, supernatural stories, terror tales, and horror tales as if they were quite synonymous terms. The anthology *Six Novels of the Supernatural* which I edited years ago for The Viking Portable Library was objected to, I remember, by one reviewer, a rather distinguished writer, because the manifestations it dealt with were not sufficiently horrible, which caused Marjorie Bowen to inquire why angels were less supernatural than other nonearthly creatures. Of course some people are afraid of angels too, and one can well understand why they should be in some cases. The gentlest of all Mr. Copper's tales

(and the one which I confess I care for most) is the last story in the *Evil* volume, "Charon." "Charon" is as much concerned with death as any of the others, and a great deal more so than some, but it would be difficult to suggest that the transition could be achieved more gracefully or with greater benevolence.

Elsewhere Mr. Copper's readers will surely find terror enough to satisfy even my reviewer. It goes without saying, I suppose, that no writer should bother with the supernatural unless he has a gift for conjuring up what, for want of a better term, we may call "atmosphere"; there are famous stories in the genre in which we are far more afraid of what may be going to happen than of anything that actually does. In Mr. Copper's tales our worst fears are generally realized at last, but there could hardly be a better example of atmosphere than the beginning of "Dust to Dust," where the sinister qualities of the house involved are skillfully suggested without the presentation of any real substantiating evidence, and indeed even in the process of denying them. In "The Cave" the evil force is never precisely identified; in "The Spider" a commonplace thing is invested with qualities one would suppose incompatible with its actual inherent powers. In "The Flabby Men" we do learn at last what has caused everything that has terrified us from the beginning, but through most of the tale (though the specific expressions of the terror are always concrete enough), we are kept guessing, so that we come to fear that nature herself has become corrupted, which would be far more terrible than any particular evil could possibly be.

"The Flabby Men" is no more a full-dress performance, with all the stops out, however, than "Archives of the Dead," which, like "The Grey House" in the earlier collection, employs traditional materials of Satanism and vampirism, yet manages to make them as exciting as if nobody had ever used them before. Which, of course,

is characteristic of our writer. We have all, by now, read many stories about time-traveling which are built upon the there-and-back-again principle, but when the hero of "Camera Obscura" gets into the past, he is as dead there as all the people he meets.

Impressive as these stories are, however, they must probably yield the palm for originality, though not for excitement, to the very extraordinary "Janissaries of Emilion," in which the dream world actually invades the world that we call waking and masters it and wreaks destruction there. What I am saying finally, I suspect, is not merely that Mr. Copper spreads a richly varied table for his readers but, more significantly, that he manages to achieve both concentration and variety. The unifying force is the constant preoccupation with the theme of death; the variety lies in the many different ways in which it is viewed and the many different devices employed to present it. And since life is everlastingly different while death is ever the same, this calls for a degree of skill which even the alert and appreciative reader may not fully apprehend. In its own way, recharactered as it is through his subtle art, Mr. Copper's death takes on a life of its own.

EDWARD WAGENKNECHT



The Spider





M. Pinet arrived at the small country hotel just as dusk was falling on a wet October day. All about him was the melancholy of autumn, and the headlights of his car stencilled a pallid path across the glaucous surface of the soaking, leaf-scattered road.

M. Pinet was feeling pleased with himself. A representative of a large firm of Paris textile manufacturers, he had previously travelled the flat, monotonous areas of Northern France and had felt his mind becoming as rigid and unyielding as the poplar-lined roads he had daily traversed.

But now, he had been given another district, from Lyons in the south to the Ile de France, with an increase in salary as well, and he greatly appreciated the change. The beauty of his new surroundings, moreover, the different atmosphere of a novel routine, had released all his pent-up drive; his latest had been a very successful tour indeed and his wallet bulged with the notes and banker's orders of clients.

At present he was about fifty miles south of Paris and had decided that he was too tired to push on to his home in the suburb of Courbevoie. He had already driven all the way from Auxerre and hadn't started until the afternoon, but he had made good time

nevertheless. His bags of samples and the long bolts of cloth in the back of his small estate wagon shifted from side to side as he turned on the bad surface of the second-class road through the forest.

He was feeling more than usually tired and the traffic in the Paris direction had been even heavier than normal for the time of year. He had reached the outskirts of a small village that was unfamiliar to him and had then spotted the lights of a fair-sized auberge set back from the road, amid clean-smelling pine trees. The chairs and tables of summer were now stacked under canvas between the box hedges, but there came a welcome glow of light from the hallway and as he ran his car in under the heavy shadow of the trees he could see a zinc-covered bar and a thousand reflections from bottles that looked as though they contained most warming liquids. There were no other vehicles parked in front of the inn, but that did not worry M. Pinet. He had no particular desire for company; uppermost in his mind was the thought of a half bottle of wine to chase away the dank chill of autumn, a good dinner, and eight hours' refreshing sleep before pushing on to Paris in the morning.

He parked his car, securely locked it, and a few moments later found himself in a delightful-looking hall, containing a bar, some leather stools, and a profusion of late summer flowers. A cat lay stretched on the polished tile floor. There was no other sign of life, apart from a man dressed in city clothes who was drinking cognac. He went out a moment after M. Pinet came in, muttering a *sotto voce* good-evening, and a short time later M. Pinet saw a big blue Mercedes, which had evidently been parked lower down the road, go by the window.

In response to the sharp, insistent bell on the zinc counter there presently came the shuffling of slippers and the patron appeared. He was all *bonhomie* and effusive welcome; yes, of

course monsieur could have a room and dinner if he desired. It was the end of the season and he would not find it very gay—there was no one else dining in, but the chef could make him anything within reason. He would have his baggage fetched, if he wished.

All this was very gratifying and as M. Pinet signed the register he should have been pleased. He had brought his solitary valise in with him and after an aperitif he began to forget the dreariness of the autumn evening and the mile after mile of sodden woods outside. He was agreeably surprised, too, at the sumptuous furnishings of the dining-room, which could easily have seated over two hundred people; the patron explained that many visitors came out from Paris to dine during the season.

M. Pinet felt he was being unfair, but it was the character of the landlord which spoiled what otherwise would have been a delightful sojourn. He hadn't caught the man's name, but there was something about him which put M. Pinet off. He was an average-sized man with a triangular yellow face, a bald head, and unnaturally large ears. His little eyes sparkled meanly, redolent of greed and insincerity, and his wide slit mouth, which often parted to reveal gold teeth, was the crowning glory of an exceedingly ugly visage.

To M. Pinet's discomfort this individual set out to make himself ingratiatingly helpful, and personally waited on him at dinner. Of other staff M. Pinet saw none, though there must have been people in the kitchen beyond as he frequently heard the low murmur of voices and once a plump woman in a low-cut black frock, possibly the patron's wife, walked by in the distance, giving him a stiff nod.

But first M. Pinet wanted a wash and the landlord indicated the door of the toilet. It was down a short corridor off the dining-room; he had to fumble for the light switch and he then saw to his

disgust that there was a large brown spider on the floor of the cracked stone corridor.

It seemed to watch him with little metallic eyes, and with a sense of bubbling horror M. Pinet felt it crack beneath his foot as he ground it with his heel. He had an innate fear of spiders, almost pathological in its intensity, and the violent physical nausea stayed with him until after dinner.

As he opened the door of the toilet and switched on the light there, M. Pinet could not repress a cry of panic. Faugh! There were two more of the monsters here, one on the wall near his head and the other on the floor near the toilet seat. M. Pinet fancied he could almost hear the low scratch of its legs, as it moved experimentally, its strange blue metallic eyes—the most curious he had ever seen in an insect—seeming to gaze at him with reproach. As it crunched beneath his almost hysterically wielded shoe, the eyes faded as the creature died. The other fled like lightning to a spot behind the lavatory cistern, wrenching another involuntary cry from M. Pinet's lips.

A moment later the landlord was at his side. He seemed amused and his small eyes were dancing.

"No, monsieur," he said. "Nothing to be alarmed about. The damp weather always brings them from the woods at this time of year. They will not harm you. They are my pets."

He made a sort of clucking noise with his mouth, which M. Pinet found hideously revolting, and the great brown horror behind the cistern stirred. Before M. Pinet's disbelieving eyes it scuttled onto the landlord's open palm, where he stroked it and crooned to it in a thoroughly disgusting manner.

M. Pinet, pale and disconcerted, excused himself and made shift by washing his hands and face at the washbasin in the corridor. Back in the dining-room he felt better and was relieved to see the patron first put the spider somewhere outside the back

door. He was pleased too, to see this strange character wash his own hands before disappearing into the kitchen.

The dinner was an excellent one and as M. Pinet tipped his croutons into the soup, he felt his spirits revive; the landlord was undoubtedly a somewhat peculiar man but he certainly knew how to produce a fine meal. M. Pinet was by this time so far soothed by his surroundings that he invited the landlord to join him at the table for a drink after his dinner was over. Contrary to his expectations the landlord seemed to draw more out of him than the information he gained in return. In answer to M. Pinet's point-blank question, as to whether he had been at the inn long, the patron replied, "No, not long. We move around quite a bit, my wife and I."

M. Pinet did not pursue the subject. He had decided to pay for his meal before going to bed and settle for his accommodation in the morning. He was a methodically minded man and though it all came to the same thing in the end, he preferred to do it this way. He had stepped up to the desk in a corner of the dining-room and the landlord's eyes glistened and narrowed in an unpleasant manner as he spotted the huge bundle of notes in M. Pinet's wallet. The latter realized this was a mistake and somewhat awkwardly tried to cover them over with a batch of letters he carried, but this only served to draw more attention by its obvious clumsiness.

The landlord stared at him unblinkingly, as he said, quite without emphasis, "You have had a successful season, monsieur." It was a statement, not a question, and M. Pinet managed to turn the conversation quickly to the subject of his room. A few moments later he said good-night and carried his own bag up to the chamber indicated on the first floor.

The well-carpeted corridor had bowls of flowers on tables at intervals and bright lights were burning; there was an uneasy

moment, however, as M. Pinet put his key in the lock of room Number 12. All the lights in the corridor suddenly went out, evidently controlled from downstairs, and for a long minute M. Pinet was in total darkness. A faint scratching noise away to his left brought sweat to his forehead, but a moment later he was inside his room and light flooded from the ceiling fixture. He locked the door and stood against it for a few seconds, taking in the contents of the room.

It was a prettily conceived chamber and any other time M. Pinet would have been taken with its heavily contrived charm; but tonight, with his nerves curiously shaken, he was in no mood for atmosphere. He merely undressed as quickly as he could, turned up his bed, got a novel from his valise, and noisily cleaned his teeth in the basin in the corner. The mirror reflected back an image that was noticeably pale. Before getting into bed he heard the faint noise of footsteps outside and looking through the window was disconcerted to see the figure of the landlord, silhouetted against the light from an open door, furtively studying his car. A moment later he moved off and M. Pinet heard a door slam somewhere below him. He got into bed.

The novel was a bad one and M. Pinet was greatly tired but somehow he did not want to sleep. He kept his bedside lamp burning but despite this eventually drifted off into a doze. Some time later he was awakened by the noise of a car driving away from the inn. Even as he became fully conscious he heard the faint sound of its engine die with a hum in the distance as the trees enveloped it.

For some reason M. Pinet's mind became agitated at this and he felt a great desire to look out the window to see if his car was still in front of the hotel. Before he could move, however, he heard a faint scratching noise; his nerves strained as they were, he turned his head with infinite slowness in an effort to locate the

sound. Eventually—a quick glance at his watch showed him that it was after 2:00 A.M.—he narrowed down the source of the sound as coming from the triangular area formed by the corner of the ceiling farthest from him.

It was in the gloomiest part of the chamber, for the light from the reading lamp extended only a yard or two; to switch on the main light M. Pinet would have to cross over to the door and he was loath to do this, particularly in his bare feet. He compromised by turning up the bedside lamp so that the light shone towards the far corner of the room. There was something there, but it was still so wrapped in shadow that he could not make out what it was.

He groped for his glasses on the table by the bed; to do this he had to lower the lamp to its usual position, and while he was fumbling with this he heard his spectacle case fall with a soft thump onto the carpet at his bedside. He looked down; the spectacles were only about two feet from him but again, he had great reserve about stretching out his hand to the carpet. Dry-mouthed he turned, as the scratching noise came again and a cry was strangled in his throat as he saw the shadowy thing scuttle a little closer towards him across the ceiling; even without his glasses he did not need to be told what it was, but his senses still refused to believe.

Something furry, like a tarantula, bigger than a soup-plate, round and with legs as thick as telephone cables. Its legs rustled together as it came across the ceiling with old-maidish deliberation and a thin purring noise came from it. As it edged forward into the brightness of the lamp M. Pinet saw with sick fear that it was covered with brown fur and had an obscene parody of a mouth.

He looked round desperately for a stick or any other weapon, but there was nothing; his tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth,

denying him the shriek which would have saved him; his pyjamas streamed with perspiration and moisture dabbled his forehead. He closed his eyes once and opened them with an effort, hoping against hope that he was in the grip of nightmare. But the obscene, sliding thing was nearer still and M. Pinet gave up hope. He saw now that the creature had metallic blue eyes, like the eyes of the insects he had crushed in the washroom, and as they glared into his own with implacable hatred he noticed with a last shock of surprise that they were very like the landlord's.

The insect paused and then launched itself on a thick silken thread; a nauseous stench was in his nostrils, the great spider gave a sibilant rattle and then it was on his mouth, covering his face and eyes with its bloated, sticky carcass. M. Pinet gave shriek after shriek as consciousness mercifully expired.

"A most curious case," said the doctor, washing his hands in the washbasin of M. Pinet's room. "Heart sound as a bell, yet he must have died instantaneously from some great shock. Never come across anything like it. There'll have to be an inquiry, of course."

And the doctor, who was a matter-of-fact human being, gave a heavy sigh. The landlord's wife, who stood just inside the door of the death chamber, timidly assented.

Down below in the bar the landlord, who lived by the secret fears of his customers, smiled a curious smile. He fondled a thick bundle of notes under the counter.

In the room above, a tiny brown spider, not more than an eighth of an inch across, scuttled nervously across the dead man's forehead. The doctor brushed it impatiently away and it fell out of sight by the side of the bed.



The Cave



“Fear is a strange thing, and yet a comparative thing,” said Wilson. “It means something different to you, something again to me. Temperament has so much to do with it; one man is afraid of heights, another of the dark, a third of the illogical in life.”

The small group in the dining club stirred and gazed expectantly. Nobody answered. Encouraged, Wilson went on.

“In fiction anything to do with the illogical, the mysterious, or the macabre has to be stage-managed. The *mise-en-scène* is set about with darkness, storms, scudding clouds, and all the apparatus of the Victorian Gothick novella. Life isn’t like that and fear often comes, as the Bible says, at noonday. And this is the most frightful type of fear of all.”

I put down my newspaper and Pender followed suit. The half dozen or so of us in the room gathered about the big central mahogany dining-table, facing Wilson in his comfortable chair by the fire.

“I remember a particular instance which fitted no pattern imposed by logic,” said Wilson, “and yet it was a perfect example of the terror by noonday. I had it at first-hand from an unimpeachable witness. It was simply that Gilles Sanroche, a

middle-aged farmer, went stark-raving mad in the middle of a wheatfield, at noonday, in perfect August weather, on a hillside above Epoisses in Central France. It was not sunstroke, there was nothing in the field, and in fact the affair would have been an absolute mystery but for one thing.

“The man was able to babble about ‘something in the wheat’ and there were three witnesses who came forward to say that they had seen great waves of wind following a fixed pattern in the corn surrounding the unfortunate man. And there was no wind at all on the day in question.”

Wilson paused again to see that his words were taking effect. No one ventured an opinion, so he resumed his apparently disconnected musings.

“There’s a mystery for you, if you like. And what drove Sanroche insane in broad daylight on a beautiful day in a French cornfield has never been discovered. But the local people spoke of ‘the Devil snarling and prowling in the wind’ up and down the valleys, and in fact a mediaeval inscription speaks to that effect in one of the local churches.

“There is a germ of truth in the superstitions of these country folk and they talked, in a picturesque phrase, of the ‘fence of the priesthood being thin’ in that part of France. I was much taken with this simile, I must say; it was as though the physical presence of the clergy were spread in a living chain through the mountains and valleys of the country, literally fencing out the Devil.

“Whether the Devil actually appeared to Gilles Sanroche I have no idea; he may have thought he did. But there is no doubt in my mind that fear took away his sanity that hot August afternoon. In one of his stories somewhere, de Maupassant strikingly illustrates the effect of fear on the human mind. He

describes a night in a mountain hut—a night of appalling fear for the occupant—but dawn finds a logical explanation. The hideous face at the window was merely the narrator's dog and the remainder of the story was supplied by the atmosphere of the lonely hut and the man's own terror.

“I was greatly impressed with this story when I first read it as a young man,” Wilson continued, “and I have often returned to it since, as it strikingly parallels an experience of my own—also in the mountains—which again, though unexplainable, communicated to me the most fearful sensations of my life. The difference in my case being that though I myself saw or experienced very little in the way of concrete happenings, the facts underlying the experience were very terrible indeed, as subsequent events made clear.”

There was by now a deep and expectant silence in the room, broken only by the hardly discernible crackling of the fire. Pender hastily passed the whisky decanter to me, refilled his own glass, and we then gave our undivided attention to Wilson who sat, one hand supporting his head, gazing fixedly into the fire.

“I had gone on the second of a series of long walking tours in the Austrian Tyrol,” he said. “All this was many years ago. I was then a young man of about twenty-nine years, I should say; strong, well built, untiring after eight hours' walking over rough country. Sound in wind and limb in every way and not at all imaginative or given to morbid fancies or anything of that kind.

“I enjoyed long holidays in those days and I expected to spend at least two months in the exhilarating atmosphere of those great mountains. I was in good spirits, in first-class condition after three weeks' hard tramping, and in addition I was in the early stages of love.

“I had met the girl who was later to become my wife in Inns-

bruck the first day of my holiday, and when our ways parted a week later, I had arranged to meet her again some weeks after. In the meantime I intended to explore some of the more remote valleys and photograph the carvings in a number of the older churches.

“I had spent the greater part of one day slogging my way up an immense shoulder of foothill, stumbling on scree, and awkwardly threading up through dense forests of pine and fir. By late afternoon I became painfully aware that I had little idea of my whereabouts. The village I had been making for that morning should have been, according to my map, down the next valley but I could see nothing but the green tops of the pines marching to the horizon. It seemed obvious that I had passed the valley entrance in making my long circuit of the shoulder; I had little alternative than to press on farther up the hill or camp where I remained. I was ill-equipped for the latter; I had few provisions and not much more than a ground sheet and a couple of blankets strapped to my back.

“It did not take me long to make up my mind. There were quite a few more hours of daylight left and once I had quit the shadows of the forest and regained open country I should be walking in the sunshine. I decided to see what awaited me at the summit of the foothill; in the meantime I spent ten minutes resting, smoking, and admiring the view. I found half a packet of chocolate in my pocket and fortified by this went forward up the last half mile, if not with élan, at least with more cheerfulness.

“I was pleased to find with the thinning out of the trees at the top, that I had chanced on a small road which evidently led from one valley to another. It was little more than a cart track but nevertheless a heartening sign of civilization, and with the help of my map I was able to orientate myself. I soon saw where I had

gone wrong and assumed, correctly, that the road I had found would take me over to the next village to the west of the one I had originally intended making for.

“I was glad to be out of the sombre gloom of the forest, and the upland road with its air of height and spaciousness, together with the sun which danced on the ground ahead of me, completely restored my spirits. I had walked for over an hour, and the road again began to descend into a valley, when I eventually saw the wooden spire of a tall church piercing the roof of the pines below me. A minute or two more and a sizeable community of thirty or forty houses spread itself out in the evening light.

“But as I descended to the village I caught sight of a large sign at the roadside: Gasthof. Set back from the road were heavy wooden gates, which were flung open. A drive corkscrewed its way upwards and a few paces round the corner I could see a large hotel of the chalet type, its pine construction gleaming cheerfully in the fading sunlight. The trim grass in front was kept in bounds by a blaze of flowers. The whole place had a magnificent view of the valley below and it was this, as much as the prospect of saving myself a walk, that decided me to put up here for the night.

“Though the accommodation would probably be expensive, it would be worth it for the view alone. Alas, for my hopes. A stout, Brünnhilde type of woman, her blonde hair scraped back in a large bun, who appeared in the hotel foyer in response to my repeated ringing at the outer door, shook her head. Nein, she said, the guesthouse was closed for the season.

“Here was a blow. Worse was to come. The woman, who seemed to be some sort of caretaker, explained in bad English, prompted by my halting German, that the hotels in the village were closed also—it was the end of the season. I could try but she very much doubted if I would be successful. There were only two

hotels and she herself knew that the proprietor of one had closed and taken himself and his family off for their own holiday in Switzerland.

“By this time the woman had been joined in front of the hotel by a brace of savage wolfhounds, who kept up menacing growls. I was glad I had not encountered them in the grounds and said as much to the woman, who gave me a wintry smile. What was I to do, I asked. She shrugged. My best hope was to try one or two houses where families took in occasional boarders. I could obtain advice from the police station.

“I thanked her and was already retracing my footsteps along the drive when she recalled me with a word. She apologized; she didn't know what she had been thinking of. If I didn't mind another short walk in the forest she was sure Herr Steiner could offer me accommodation. It would be of a simple sort. . . . She shrugged again.

“She pointed out a path which twisted between the hotel flower beds and descended steeply through the inevitable pine trees. I gathered the place was half inn, half private residence, run by a middle-aged German couple. In the season it acted as a sort of overflow annexe to the hotel, as it was only a quarter of a mile away, though quite secluded. Herr Steiner had an arrangement with the hotel over sending him guests; there was a monetary aspect and he was no doubt pleased of the extra custom for his own remote establishment. The woman apologized once again; she came from another district and was deputizing for her sister, otherwise she would have remembered the guesthouse earlier. I thanked her once more. She told me then that the road I had found earlier looped just before it reached the village and met Herr Steiner's establishment. I could either take the path from the hotel grounds or go along the road.

“I made my farewell and decided to take the road. The dark path looked uninviting, the sun was sinking, and the thin tinkling of water from far distances lent a melancholy aspect to the evening. Besides, I had no wish to meet the wolfhounds in some lonely clearing, so I waved the woman good-bye.

“In another five minutes I had descended the road, found the fork she spoke of, and then, a couple of hundred yards farther on, was rewarded by lights shining through the trees. It was now dusk and the noise of water was louder. I threaded a moss-grown path and saw a substantially built gasthof, of the traditional chalet pattern, with carved porch and vast, overhanging eaves.

“Herr Steiner and his wife Martha, the couple who owned the gasthof, were an amiable pair and made me welcome, late in the season though it was. The husband, a man of late middle age, tall, stoop-shouldered, with a drooping ginger moustache, was much given to sitting by the kitchen fire by the hour, reading all the news in the ill-printed local newspaper, holding up the sheet close to the eyes and studying the small print with the aid of a pocket magnifier.

“He seemed to go through every scrap of information it contained, including the small advertisements, and it was always with regret that he at last closed the lens with a snap, disappointed that there was nothing further to read. His wife was quite elderly, at least fifteen years older, I should have said, reserved and quiet. She flitted like a shadow in the background but nevertheless it was flitting to some purpose for her establishment was impeccably clean, the meals punctual and of excellent quality.

“I was only with the Steiners three days, but it did seem to me as though some trouble lurked at the back of Steiner’s eyes, and once or twice I caught him, when he thought himself unobserved, in a curious posture, his newspaper dropped unnoticed to his

knees, his head on one side, as though he were listening for someone or something.

“For in truth, though their establishment was within such a short distance of both the village and the more imposing establishment higher up the hill, it appeared both lonely and isolated, mainly due to the overhanging hillside which cut it off from the main hotel, and to the thickly overgrown woodland with which it was surrounded.

“This made the place seem damp and melancholy, and on my first evening, pushing open the shutters of my bedroom window, the impression given by the falling of water from somewhere below, in the silence of the night, affected my heart with a profound sadness. In all other matters, however, I saw nothing untoward. The Steiners were reasonably cheerful landlords, the terms moderate, the food of the best, as I have said, and all in all I counted myself fortunate to have such a headquarters while I continued on my walks and explorations of the neighbourhood.

“I had proposed staying for a week, but events conspired to make this impossible, as you will see. On my first morning at the Steiners I set out soon after breakfast to reconnoitre the neighbourhood. I decided to leave the village until later and concentrated on the thick shelf of woodland on which the lower guesthouse was built.

“This ran slanting across the mountainside and eventually came out onto a cliff-like plateau. Below was a superb panorama of the village and the forests beyond; above, more forest and the uplands on which the large hotel stood. It was a day of bright sunshine and it was with considerable contentment that I left the last of the trees behind and was able to walk freely on mossy undersoil, split here and there by outcrops of rock. I wandered in this way for an hour or more until I at length came out on a

precipitous bluff and was rewarded by a magnificent view of the entire valley.

“It was as I was coming away, half drugged by the beauties of the scene, that my eye was arrested by a patch of bold colour in the landscape. This was unusual in this region of dark greens of pines and fir, and the russet hue irritated my mind, so that I turned aside my steps and went to see what it was. An unpleasant shock then, in that time and place, my thoughts quite unprepared for such a thing, to find that what had attracted my eye was the scarlet of blood.

“Great splashes and gouts were spread over the rocks and it was with considerable alarm that I followed a short trail. A few yards away, on the other side of a large boulder, lay the corpse of a young goat, evidently not long dead. I must say I looked about me with considerable unease, for I had at first thought the creature might have fallen from the rocks. I then plainly saw I had been mistaken and that the animal’s throat had been torn out, and its breast viciously savaged.

“This was evidently the work of some large and dangerous animal, and I make no apology for stating that I broke off a heavy tree branch and armed in this fashion set back on my walk to the guesthouse. On the way I met a man, who from his dress seemed like a shepherd, and told him of my discovery. He went pale and swore at some length.

“‘We have been troubled with this beast for some time,’ he said, so far as I could make out from his heavy German accent. He told me too that even cattle had been dragged off from herds in the vicinity over the past few months. He thanked me and said he would warn the municipal authorities.

“I was glad to arrive back to find the usual peaceful atmosphere in the guesthouse. My lunch was just coming up to the

table, Herr Steiner as usual, reading by a fire which simmered in the great kitchen range.

“There being no other guests in the hotel, I chose to have my meals in the great beamed kitchen with the Steiners, and they were cheerful company in the evenings. My landlord had quite a good command of English, so conversation was not the strain it might have been for me.

“I set to with eagerness, for the walk had sharpened my appetite. The main course over, I sipped my beer contentedly, and fell into conversation with Herr Steiner. But when I mentioned the matter of the dead goat it had an unlooked-for effect. Steiner turned quite white and sat with his mouth open, staring at me. I was rescued from this somewhat embarrassing moment by a loud crash in the background. Frau Steiner had gone to fetch the dessert and there was the bowl shattered on the floor of the kitchen.

“What with apologies, moppings up, and the preparation of a fresh dessert, the incident passed over. When we again returned to it at the end of the meal, Steiner remarked, with an obviously simulated ease, that there had been some ravages among livestock by a beast which local hunters had so far failed to kill. He had been taken aback, he said, by the fact that the goat may have been from their own herd, but this could not be so as they were completely enclosed in the meadow below the house.

“I accepted this explanation, not wanting to appear over-curious, but I remained convinced in my own mind that Steiner was lying. The old couple’s alarm was too great for such an incident as they had suggested, but the matter was their concern, not mine, and there I was prepared to leave it. But the business continued to fret my mind and after lunch, somewhat ashamed of my overprecipitate retreat from the area where I had found the

goat, I set out to explore once again. On the way through the outbuildings surrounding the Steiners' establishment, I caught sight of the block where the old man had been chopping up firewood, and, almost without thinking, seized the small hand axe which stood on the block, and thrust it into my belt.

"It would make a useful weapon if need be and it boosted my morale no end. I eventually found my way back to the scene of my unnerving experience; the patch of blood was still there, dried and black in the sun, but the goat had disappeared, removed no doubt by the foresters. Or had the beast which killed it, disturbed by my appearance, hidden and retrieved its prey after I had returned to the inn? That was an even more disturbing thought and it was with a valour that surprised myself, that I took out my axe and started a circular search to see if the dead beast had been dragged off.

"I was not at first successful. The bleeding had stopped and there was only an occasional splash. But then I was rewarded by a wavering line in the dust, apparently made by the goat's hind legs. It had been dragged back in the direction it had already traversed in its dying struggles. I felt a slight tickling of the hair at the base of my neck when I saw these faint scratch marks, and I must confess I looked round me sharply in every direction and tightened my grip on the axe.

"Though I am no expert tracker, the marks seemed to prove that the beast concerned could not be a very big one, as it would otherwise have carried the goat clear of the ground. My experiences in India proved my point, for I have seen a tiger carry a full-grown bullock clear of the ground, its enormous strength capable of tremendous leverage, once its jaws were firmly fixed in the centre of the bullock's back.

"But nothing stirred in all the wide expanse of foothill, apart

from the soft movement of the branches of the trees, and the sun continued to pour down onto a beneficent world. The scratching on the earth gradually ceased and eventually, when thick grass was reached, the trail petered out. But I had already noted the general direction in which the goat was being dragged and I continued to push on towards a region of cliffs and rocky outcrops in the distance as I felt the end of my search might well lie there.

“I had by now gone about two miles and when I eventually reached my destination the sun had sunk a considerable distance in the sky, though not enough to give me any anxiety, as there were several hours of daylight left. I felt I could remain on this spot about an hour and a half, for under the circumstances and not knowing with what type of beast I might be dealing, I judged it prudent to gain the inn over the long forest road while daylight lasted.

“And yet the end of my journey was almost an anticlimax. There was no sign of a trail, which had long disappeared, neither could I see any trace of the goat, as I studied the terrain from the pinnacle of a rocky hillock. I walked a little closer to the frowning cliffs facing me and after a while found myself in a small gorge. I gripped the axe tightly as I rounded the last corner and discovered it was a cul-de-sac. There was no trace of anything having passed, which was not surprising, as the valley floor was almost entirely composed of solid rock.

“I was about to retrace my steps when I spotted the dark entrance of a cave, half seen beyond the lip of a mountainous pile of boulders and rubble. As I approached I saw that it was of vast size. The gloomy entrance went up perhaps forty feet into the solid cliff above, which ended in an overhang. In front of the cave was a belt of sand and I stood for a moment, shading my eyes, attempting to penetrate the deep shadow beyond. I could see nothing from where I stood.

“I hesitated a moment longer. There was no sound anywhere; not even a bird’s cry broke the stillness, and the paternal sun shone blandly down, gilding everything in a limpid golden light. I grasped the axe again and then went forward in a rush, rather more hysterically than I had intended. This brought me almost to the cave entrance; the shadow lay not more than six feet away and with this proximity came a layer of dank air.

“It was a strange feeling, almost like stepping into a bath of cold water. The sun warmed my back but on my face and all the front of my body fell the dampness and mouldiness of decay. My last steps had also taken me to one side and I could now see the carcass of the goat lying half-in, half-out of the shadow. The head had been eaten, but the rest of the body was intact. I saw something else too; scattered in the gloom of the cave mouth were a few bones of small animals, morsels of flesh. I recognized a thigh bone of something and farther back a rib cage.

“Still militant, I went forward again and then my axe fell to my side. Once within the shadow, the clamminess and coldness completely enveloped me. I saw nothing more, nothing moved, but I sensed, rather than saw, that the cave went back to vast depths into the earth. And I knew then that I could not, to save my life, venture into it and retain my sanity. With this knowledge came relief. I was able to take four paces backwards—I dare not turn my back on the place—and once again stood in the freshness of the sunshine.

“It was then that I heard the faintest scratching noise from the interior of the cave and I realized with a certainty that something was watching me. My nerve almost snapped, but if I gave way to panic, it would be fatal. I had the strength and fortitude to retain my hold on the axe, my one frail defence against the terror that was threatening to master me, and step by step, walking backwards I progressed from that sinister place into sanity.

“I had got almost to the area where the grass met the first rocky outcrops some hundreds of yards away, and a ludicrous sight I must have been to any observer, when there came the final incident which broke my nerve. It was nothing by itself, but it seemed to paralyze my will and send a scalding thrill of terror down into my entrails.

“From somewhere within the area of the cave came a low, dry, rasping cough—it wasn’t repeated and there was nothing exceptional about it—but the terrible thing to me was, that it was like the furtive, half-stifled throat clearance of a human being. Something went then; I could not face that sound again and I whirled on my toes and flailing with the axe before me I ran for my life, with stark fear at my heels, until the blood drumming in my head and the wild thumping of my heart at last forced me to collapse onto a rock half a mile from the area I had just quitted.

“The sun was by now a good way down the sky. Nothing had followed me, but I still had a longish walk through the forest, so after a short breather I set out again, albeit more sedately, until I at last came to the inn and the safety of my own room.

“I was late down to supper that evening. I had debated long with myself over the wisdom of revealing what I had discovered to the Steiners. Their reactions of the morning had been so extreme that I feared what might be the outcome. In the event I waited until Frau Steiner had retired, then I tackled her husband. He sat smoking his pipe in the kitchen as usual, politely waiting until I had finished my after-dinner brandy, so that he could clear away.

“Though his face turned an ashen colour, he was surprisingly calm and we discussed for some time the implications of my discovery. He told me that he would let the civil authorities know the following morning; no doubt they would arrange for a shoot to take place if the depredations among goats and cattle con-

tinued. I had naturally made nothing of the more sombre side of the matter. I merely told him I had found the cave and that it did seem to me that it might be the lair of the beast responsible for cattle killing.

“But there still remained the problem of Herr Steiner’s manner. Both he and his wife had given me the impression that they were well aware of the strange and sinister creature that was taking such a toll of the livestock; that they were secretly afraid and they themselves had no intention of initiating any action against it. It may have been, I felt, turning it over in my mind yet again in my bedroom later that evening, that they had a similar experience to myself. Remembering the incident of the cave and the whole atmosphere of these dark and stifling woods, I could not say that I particularly blamed them.

“Anyway, it was no business of mine; I was merely a passing stranger and expected to be on my way shortly. Though I was extremely comfortable at their inn, I had had my fill of walking recently and was inclined to linger. It was pleasant to know, as one trudged back in the twilight of these great woods, that a pleasant meal was awaiting one, with friendly faces and a good bed assured. Fortified by these and similar thoughts I soon slept.

“Next morning I decided to take a stroll down into Grafstein; it was similar to a thousand other small villages of its type scattered about Central Europe—a huddle of timbered homes, a small central *platz*, the whole thing pivoting on the large, splendidly carved fourteenth-century church, the town hall, the two hotels, and an arcade or two of shops, some unfortunately modernized to take advantage of the tourist trade.

“While I was in the village I enjoyed a really excellent coffee and pastries at the only coffee shop and then called in at the small police station. Here I reported the matter of the goat and the cave

to the local sergeant. He thanked me for my cooperation, and I showed him the location on his large-scale map, but I did not gather from his manner that the matter was regarded as of any great importance, or that anything would be done about it in the immediate future. This sort of thing was a commonplace in the forests thereabouts, he told me.

“I looked in at the church before going back to my own guesthouse for lunch. I had brought my camera and busied myself by taking some closeups of the really magnificent carvings; the pastor was away, I was told, but I had readily obtained permission from his housekeeper, for the small intrusion my photo-making would incur. The skill of these old carvers, most of them anonymous, was really incredible, and once more I was thrilled and uplifted by the beauty and elaboration of their work.

“I finished the spool in my camera with half a dozen shots of the finely carved details of the front row pews, immediately facing the altar. They represented, so far as I could make out, scenes from the Book of Job, but one of them gave me something of a shock. It was a most unpleasant carving, of most exquisite workmanship, but the result was malevolent and forbidding in the extreme. I expect you all remember the gargoyles on Notre Dame and the way these old stone-masons had given vent to their expression of the powers of darkness that surrounded them.

“Well, this was something of the same kind, but intensified for me a hundredfold. It may have been the darkness and quiet of the old church, but I found my hands trembling as I went to set up my camera for a time exposure. The carving represented some disgusting creature with a misshapen head; incredibly emaciated, it stood erect, most of its body mercifully hidden in what I took to be reeds or grasses.

“Its long neck was disfigured by large nodules of immense size, the teeth were curved and sharp, like a boar, the eyes like a serpent. In its two, claw-like hands it held the body of a human being. It had just bitten off the head, much as one would eat a stick of celery, and the carver had cleverly managed to suggest that the creature was in the process of spitting out the head before making a start on the meal proper.

“I cannot tell you what nausea this loathsome creature inspired in me; it seemed almost to move in its frame of dark wood, so brilliantly had the carver, an artist of some genius, depicted his subject. In the flat terms which I have just used, it is impossible to convey my impressions of that moment. But loathsome or not, I knew that I had to have the carving on film and that when I returned to England I should want to find out more about it.

“So I hastily completed my preparations for the picture, pressed the catch, and waited for the clicking of the time-exposure mechanism to cease before dismantling my tripod and equipment. As the mechanism died and the exposure was made, there was a loud noise somewhere at the back of the church. This startled me for some reason, but I thought that perhaps the verger, or whatever his German equivalent might be, had come in to see that all was well.

“However, the interruption caused me considerable unease and I hastily packed up my gear and made my way back up the aisle of the church and into the open air. To my surprise, there appeared to be nobody else in the building, neither could I see any reason for the noise. Nothing appeared to have fallen down in the church; but I was late for lunch and hurried out of Grafstein and back to my hotel.

“During the afternoon I wrote some letters and apart from a

short excursion down to the village to post them in the early evening, did nothing else of note that day. I lay down in my room for an hour or two before supper; when I got up again it was quite dark and I felt I had overslept. But a glance at the luminous dial of my wristwatch was enough to reassure me that the time was only half-past eight. We did not eat usually until nine or half-past, so I had plenty of time.

“I had not switched on the light and I stood at the window for a moment, looking down into the valley. It was a beautiful moonlit night and the pine forests spread out below me, with the spire of the church sticking up far beneath, looked like an old cut by Dürer.

“I was about to turn away when I heard the big sheepdog of the Steiners start barking down at the side of the hotel; I opened the window and looked out, but could see nothing. The dog was still growling, and then I heard the faintest crackling rustle in the undergrowth surrounding the hotel. The dog did not follow the noise but suddenly began to make a high, howling whine and then I heard Steiner come out with curses and cuff the dog, shouting to it to go back indoors.

“The noise continued for a few moments, farther away now, a faint abrasive, sinister rustling like someone or something making its way with definite aim and purpose. It slowly passed away over the ridge and the night was silent again. Considerably troubled about this, though I could not really say why, I eventually made my way down to supper.

“The meal, as usual, was excellent, and sitting in the warm, high-beamed kitchen with the firelight dancing on gleaming brass and pewter, I once again counted myself fortunate in my accommodation and we passed a jolly evening. Tonight, for some reason or other, I had spread out on another part of the huge

central table my route maps, notes, and other material for my research, and after supper it was my wish to continue work on this.

“It was now about half-past ten and I busied myself in clearing up the material, preparatory to taking it up to my room. Frau Steiner had gone to bed, but my host, who as usual remained with me to smoke and read his paper, would have none of this.

“‘Work there,’ he said jovially, motioning me to leave my things where they were. I protested that my notes and route-preparations might take me until midnight. He merely said that he was going to bed anyway and that if I would see that I switched off the lights before I came up, I could stay there as long as I liked.

“This suited me nicely. The autumn nights were chilly and the warm atmosphere of the kitchen was preferable to that of my own room; apart from this, Herr Steiner pushed a plate of cakes and sandwiches, together with half a bottle of beer towards me, giving me a broad wink as he left. Thus it was that I came to be working in the kitchen of the Gasthof on that night, the only person on the ground floor.

“The dog was locked up somewhere in the outbuildings at the rear and to all intents I was alone in the world. One curious feature of the establishment was the fact that the kitchen door was never locked, winter or summer, as long as the Steiners were in residence. The main entrance and a door on the other side of the guesthouse were scrupulously locked every night, but for some reason, the kitchen door was excluded from this.

“It was true, it faced the main road and the village rather more conveniently than did the hotel entrance proper, though I could not quite see the point of this. The real explanation that offered itself to me was that the only means of securing the kitchen door was by a massive baulk of timber which fitted into two metal clips

set either side of the door frame. Possibly because of the trouble involved in lifting this into place every night and removing it each morning, the Steiners had let the custom lapse. And for some other reason they had omitted to have the door fitted with an ordinary lock.

“Anyway, there I was, working away quietly, enjoying the warmth of the fire and the simple excellence of the food and the beer. I completed my notes and had got well on with the details of my route for the next part of my holiday. By this time it was approaching midnight and I had begun to feel a certain tiredness coming on.

“I stretched myself and went to poke up the kitchen range fire into a blaze again, when I became aware of a faint noise. I listened intently. The sound did not emanate from inside the inn but from the outside. It was too subtle to make out at first. It was not the tinkle of running water nor the footsteps of a passing villager. I looked at my watch again and realized it was far too late in any case for these simple folk, who sought their beds early, to be about.

“Walking on tip-toe, so that I could still hear perfectly—though why I did this was somewhat obscure to me—I crossed the kitchen and stood near the window. The noise came again, a moment or two later, unpleasantly like the rustling I had heard in the wood earlier, when looking from the upstairs window.

“I do not know if you can picture my situation, and it is a difficult scene to recapture, sitting as we are in the middle of London this evening. The rustling, or scratching, call it what you will, was agonizingly slow and deliberate, and it came to my mind that it would be similar to that made by a badly crippled person walking with the aid of two sticks. There was a moment of silence, followed shortly by the scratching noise, like two sticks

being dragged painfully across the ground. At that moment, the dog gave an agonizing howl from the back of the hotel somewhere.

“That just about finished me, I can tell you, tensed up as I was. Far from being a reassurance, it meant that the dog knew there was something foul and unnatural outside which wanted to get in. As this thought came to me, I looked wildly at the door, with the obvious intention of locking it. I am not normally a nervous or timid sort of man, but something had got hold of me that evening and I was not my usual self.

“The baulk of timber was obviously too big and heavy to manoeuvre into place without a lot of noise, and besides, something kept me rooted to the spot, so that I seemed incapable of action.

“The electric light still burned on, comfortingly modern, etching everything in bright relief. I had stood to one side of the window, so that my shadow could not be seen, but I felt that whoever—whatever—was outside, very well knew who was there. And I would not, for any money you can name, have turned out the light, for reasons too obvious to go into.

“As the scratching noise was repeated, and, as it seemed to my hypersensitive nerves, even nearer, I looked around again for a weapon of some sort, but without success. There was a long moment of silence and then, from outside the house, came the foul, low sort of snuffling cough I had heard in the cave. The dog gave another whine that set my jagged nerves aflame and there was a creak as the big old wooden latch of the door commenced to lift.

“I was galvanized into action then. I did not know what might be outside but I only knew that I should become insane if I met it face to face. I threw myself at the door and put all my weight on

the latch, forcing it downwards. The pressure was not resisted, but a moment or two later I found it rising, with irresistible force. For a horrifying second or so the door actually opened an inch, perhaps two, then with the strength of fear I hurled it closed and clung to the latch with all the weight of my body.

“Once more I felt it being raised, despite all I could do to stop it. But now I had got my feet jammed against a brick in the irregular stone floor and I exerted all my strength to prevent what was outside from coming in. I was still terribly afraid but something of that first appalling fear, which saps all will power from the brain, had left me, and as I was forced fractionally back, I cast looks about me for aid.

“Then I saw the beam lying in the angle of the wall, not more than four feet from me. I crashed the door back into its framework, and jamming my foot against the bottom, I seized the huge piece of wood and with the strength of terror man-handled it towards me. My foot slipped on the floor as the door pressed in on me, and the end of the beam, rasping across the kitchen wall, upset a large brass warming pan which fell down to the stone floor with a tremendous crash. I think this is what saved the situation, for hitherto this insidious struggle in which I had been engaged, had been fought implacably, in silence.

“The door gaped wide for a moment, but then the dog, aroused by the crash commenced barking angrily; and at the same instant Herr Steiner, woken by the noise, shouted down the stairs. Light sprang on in the upper-storey, and as the pressure on the door melted away I fell against it and slammed the beam home in the metal stanchions with almost hysterical strength. Then I fell onto the kitchen floor, all the purpose gone from my legs.

“I will not weary you with the scene that followed; the amazed and terrified appearance of the Steiners; the temporary insanity of the dog; the pouring of brandy down my throat; my disconnected

story to the innkeeper and his wife. Needless to say none of us slept for the remainder of the night; we piled the heaviest furniture we could find against all three doors—even this took considerable resolve under the circumstances—and it was as much as I could do to carry out my part of the undertaking.

“Never have I felt such fear as I encountered that night; it turned my limbs to water, sapped all my will power; it took all the strength of character I possessed to double-rivet my soul back into my body, if you can understand such a term. After I had recovered myself a little—a false recovery, as it turned out, engendered largely by the brandy—Steiner and I secured all the doors and windows, as I have said. Then we retired to the topmost room of the house, leaving every light in the building burning. Steiner had the excellent idea of scattering the staircase with copper pans and utensils, so that we should have prior warning of anything moving towards us up the stairs.

“He then took three enormous sporting rifles—one more like a blunderbuss—with him, and we all three locked ourselves in the bedroom with the stoutest door. We had more than four hours to wait until dawn—it was by now about half-past one—but since the commotion in the kitchen when I fell to the ground there had mercifully been no further sound from out of doors.

“We passed a wretched time, talking in half-whispers and starting at the slightest sound outside—from the night wind to the faint tapping of a branch upon a topmost windowpane. After my explanation, we did not refer directly to the situation, but approached it by oblique routes, and I was more than ever convinced that the Steiners knew more than they were willing to tell.

“Once I heard his wife mumble, ‘But they have never come this far before,’ and then her husband clamped his hand over her arm and she lapsed into silence. For my part, I was alone with the

terrible truth of the situation; for which among God's creatures has the wit and intelligence to lift a door latch in the manner of a human being? An ape or monkey perhaps? Perhaps. But ridiculous to think of such a thing in these forests.

"Another type of animal such as a deer might lift a door latch by accident, when its horn caught underneath, but the thing which had been on the other side of the door had lifted the catch easily, much as a human being would; and there had been a terrible force and purpose in the pressure which had accompanied that silent and sinister incursion into my reason. And I had been convinced from the beginning that no human being was responsible.

"I gave it up at last and slept brokenly, sitting in a corner of the room, my back against the wall, my head on my upraised knees, clutching one of Steiner's antiquated rifles. Dawn came at about six o'clock, and though I was not awake to see it, when I did become aware of it I have never been so thankful, not even during the war years. The sounds of everyday came up to us with increasing clarity; the chant of a rooster, the grunting of pigs, the little, fussy noises of hens, and then, eventually, the reawakened bark of the old sheepdog, his fears of the night dispersed.

"But it was not until past seven o'clock, that we dared stir downstairs. We first opened windows on every side of the house but could see nothing alarming. Then a creaking farm cart passed, with a man riding on top and another walking by the shafts, and this shamed us so much, particularly as the Steiners were usually abroad looking after their livestock before six, that we all three went downstairs at once, albeit we were talking and making rather too much noise.

"The lights still burned, the copper pans were undisturbed; all was as it had been, even down to the unquestioned fact of the warming pan which I had knocked down in my superhuman

efforts to get the door barred. While the Steiners set the kitchen to rights and prepared the breakfast, I mustered my courage to unbar the door and set foot outside. I must say that I waited until I heard the approach of another cart, and then with a sort of tottering bravado hefted the massive beam to the ground and stepped out into the sunlight.

“My nightmare of the evening before might never have been. I breathed in the fresh morning air, said good-day to the two fine fellows on the cart, and then received my second shock of the last twelve hours. There had been no fantasy in the strength which had resisted mine an inch-door panel away from me, and neither was there in the curious prints of the thing which had stood without the door. I stumbled and almost fell.

“Picture if you can, the prints which met my eye that autumn morning in the foothills of those Alps. I am certain that little similar has been seen since the dawn of time. There was nothing more than two holes which stood before the door. The impressions, which were quite small, were about six inches apart. They looked more like the imprints of the ferrules of a walking stick, except that they were both slightly elongated and oval in shape. I stared at these two slots in the ground until I thought I should go mad.

“No God-created beast could have made such imprints, and as I fell back from the door I saw that there were further sets; advancing to and retreating from the inn back along the forest path I had taken on my walks to the area of the cave. Faint scratch marks linked the sets of prints.”

There was a long silence in the room, as Wilson broke off his narrative and sat looking into the depths of the fire.

“The prints of a deer, perhaps?” Pender eventually suggested nervously, as Wilson showed no sign of resuming his story.

He shook his head impatiently. “Impossible. I know the slots

of a deer, man, as well as I know my own face in the glass. I said the prints were complete sets of two; in other words the thing, or whatever it was, was standing on its hind legs—or its only legs for all I know—while attempting to open the door.

“I followed the tracks back for a short way—a very short way, for they gradually faded out. And then perhaps I did a rather foolish thing, in the light of what happened afterwards. For in a fit of angry panic I went down the path and deliberately erased the last trace of those devilish tracks with my heavy walking boots.

“However, I felt I owed a very real duty to the Steiners and I spent most of the morning trying to dissuade them from stopping at the inn; I even tried to give them hints about the tracks I had seen, but the words wouldn’t come properly. Naturally, the old couple wouldn’t dream of giving up their home of a lifetime to move away at their age.

“‘But, Herr Wilson,’ said the old man, ‘be reasonable. It is our living.’ He had quite a point there, but it didn’t dissuade me from asking them to go, for I was mortally afraid for the couple. They had been extraordinarily kind to me in the short time I had known them. But I saw it was no use in the end, though I did suggest that they buy a couple of wolfhounds like those at the hotel above and—before all—have a good set of bolts fitted to the kitchen door.

“Steiner almost gave himself away at the last for he looked at me almost as though he would burst into tears, and said, ‘Bolts are no good, in the end, against such things.’ Then he saw the look on his wife’s face and became silent; it was his last word on the topic and he never referred to it again. Naturally, I had no desire to remain any longer at the Gasthof where I had passed such a night; I had packed in the morning. The Steiners quite understood, but it was with a heavy heart that I said good-bye to

them in the early afternoon, shouldered my rucksack, and set off through the forest once again.

"I made one last attempt before I left and said, 'At least see that the village mounts a hunt and cleans out that cave.' He looked at me in a sorrowful manner and waved good-bye. His last words to me were, 'Thank you, mein Herr. We know you are only trying to be helpful.' I had rerouted my trail, to pass at least eight miles to the west of the cave, so I set off down into the village and resumed my walking tour, the remainder of which was uneventful—insofar as it touches the core of this story, that is."

Wilson paused again and silently drained his glass. "You need not worry that I shall leave the story unfinished," he said. "There is a sequel and a terrible one, though by rights I should have left the thing where it was. But all the rest of my holiday I kept thinking about the old couple, the loneliness of the guesthouse, that cursed cave and the nature of the events which had given me such a dreadful night.

"I made the mistake of going back and thereby added guilt to my remembered fear. I made a slight detour on my way home to England and stopped off for a day on the way through. I was accompanied by three other people who don't concern the story, though one, as I have indicated already, was to concern me for the remainder of my life. I left them at the cafe and walked up the well-remembered hill to the hotel. On the way I met the sergeant of police and a lot of activity; cars and so forth coming down.

"I asked him what was the matter and he said, quite quietly and simply, that the old couple had been murdered; in the most brutal and sadistic fashion imaginable. They had been literally torn to pieces after barricading themselves in a bedroom, and — most foul detail of all—had been decapitated; the heads were never found. I thought of the carving in the church and felt sick.

This terrible event had happened only two days before; the forests had been combed, but to no avail. We had by this time walked back down to the small police station, for I now had no wish to continue up the hill. I thought of the events of three weeks earlier and began in my mind the first of a hundred thousand regrets.

“And yet I was angry with the police, and the Steiners too, if I analyzed my own feelings; I asked the sergeant, rather roughly in the circumstances, whether he had taken my advice about the cave. Had they, in fact, organized a shooting party to kill the beast that I supposed lurked within it? The beast that might, in fact, be responsible for the Steiners’ death?

“He looked at me stammering, his face quite pale. Nothing had been done, of course; the matter had been entirely overlooked—the village and the police particularly, had the murders to think of. But with typical German efficiency he immediately set about organizing a hunting party and two hours later a heavily armed posse of about forty expert shots streamed out of the village.

“I should have gone with them, but somehow I could not face it; the death of the Steiners had quite knocked me out; but we—that is, myself and my three friends—were put up for the night by one of the village families. The party, who, of course, knew the cave area well, returned long before nightfall. The sergeant, when I saw him again, was curiously reticent. It was, he said, a bad place.

“The men had not ventured far beyond the entrance; the labyrinth stretched for miles, they had been told; they were fetching dynamite in the morning, and an Army expert over from the garrison town, to block the entrance. He looked at me apologetically, as though I were about to accuse him and his colleagues of cowardice. But I could not say I blamed him. Had I

not done exactly the same? And that is what they did. Brought down the entire mountainside and bottled in the thing or whatever it was; I kept in touch by letter and so far as I can learn the countryside has remained untroubled."

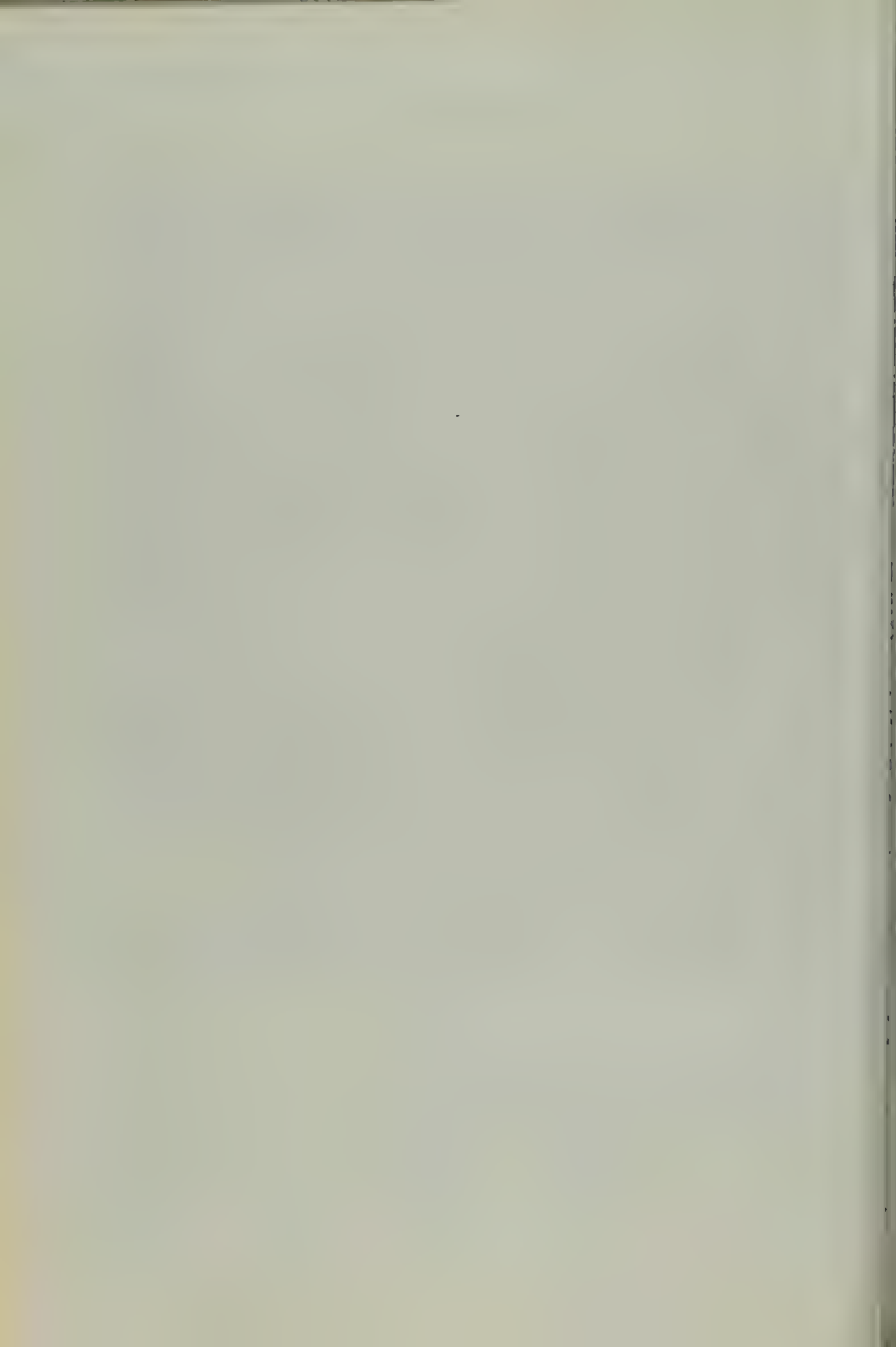
Wilson broke off once more to recharge his glass. "Which brings the wheel full circle," he said. "The problem of fear. Fear such as I have never experienced in my life, and which I could not possibly face again. To this day I could not tell you why. Yet I saw nothing, unless you count two slots in the ground. And I felt little, except that tremendous pressure on a door; I heard little, except a muffled cough and some faint scratchings in the night. Little enough for a student of the macabre. Yet something devilish killed the Steiners."

"And you know nothing beyond that?" queried someone else, who sat in shadow beyond me.

"Only theories," said Wilson, lifting his head in the brindled firelight. "I developed my rolls of film when I got back home. All were perfect except one, inside the church, which was a complete blank, with never a trace of a picture. And I am sure you will know the picture I mean. But if my theory is correct it would explain their attitude."

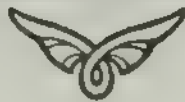
There was a long silence again.

Then, "Pass the brandy, Pender," I said, rather more sharply than I had intended.





Dust to Dust





Mr. Appleton bought the house almost at first glance. It was within the confines of the village, but just far back enough in its own trim orchard grounds to be unobtrusive. The building was well maintained and really, there was a wealth of accommodation for the money. The price was not cheap and yet certainly well below the market value for a property of such character. Not that there was anything historic about Dotterells, Mr. Appleton judged.

The house was Edwardian, he would have said. Tile-hung and well converted to modern standards it had an air of old-maidish smugness, as though it sat like a contented cat, back from the bustle of the street, its two clipped ornamental trees each side the path almost like paws reaching out to embrace the village.

The simile was fanciful, Mr. Appleton felt, and he was not normally a fanciful man. As the last rays of spring sunshine stained the upper windows of the house carmine it seemed to smile at him. He smiled to himself at the notion and was inevitably reminded of Carroll's crocodile welcoming the fishes in "with gently smiling jaws." He stood back in the road, leaning on his stick, and glanced at the house again. It was benevolent. A

heartening omen, he felt, and nothing in the subsequent negotiations led him to believe otherwise.

The surveyor's estimate was good; there were no hidden snags in the property. To Mr. Appleton's surprise—and he was usually a most cautious man—not more than eight weeks had gone by before he was ensconced in Dotterells, had arranged his vast array of books and papers, and had engaged a housekeeper. A most sensible woman, Mrs. Grice seemed a very superior and intelligent person for one of that station. In the necessarily brief conversation he had with her before he moved into the house, he had gathered that the previous occupant, an elderly retired gentleman, had died rather suddenly; the relatives lived abroad, and as they wanted a quick sale had asked a price well below the market value.

Mr. Appleton was satisfied. He was incurious about the everyday affairs of life and he had more than enough to occupy him; he was on volume three of his monumental work on primitive superstition, and he had promised his publisher the book would be ready in time to figure on his Christmas list. He had all summer before him, he was settling into Dotterells nicely, and if he could bring the book in by the autumn he would have a pleasant year.

Mr. Appleton sat back in his study and blinked about him, warming at the prospect. He really was more satisfied with his new home than he cared to admit. He had not, it is true, been overeffusive with the agent for the vendor, on the principle that the prospective purchaser should never appear too eager. And he was not naturally an affectionate man; his austere, bookish life had left him little time or opportunity to make lasting friendships.

But there was no doubt that the atmosphere of Dotterells was conducive to the contented spirit. His study for instance, a large,

L-shaped room on the ground floor, with a huge bay window overlooking the orchard and road beyond, could not have been more convenient for his purposes. Just now it lay bathed in late May sunshine and with its cream-painted walls and rows of varicoloured books that faced him along the far corner, soothed all the instincts of a book-lover or collector.

Mr. Appleton shifted his weight in his leather armchair and swivelled back to the window. He glanced again at the neat typescript in front of him and the tumbled heaps of reference works on the surface of the great rosewood desk and sighed. He should, he supposed, be a little more sociable, and make himself known to his neighbours on either side. But his work pressed and there would be time for the social niceties later. In the meantime he would set the house in order and press on as fast as he could. There were still eight chapters to be laid out and completed; more than enough work for his autumn deadline, for he was a writer who could not be hurried.

Mr. Appleton thought ruefully of the turmoil in his affairs over the past year; the demolition of the block of London flats in which he had spent more than half a lifetime had upset all his working habits. It was responsible too for the long delay on the work which was to crown more than three decades of achievement in scholarly literature. He had been lucky, he supposed, in making such a drastic break with town life, to find such a haven as Dotterells and the village in which it was situated. Only thirty minutes from Charing Cross and the wider world of publishing, yet it might well have been in the farthest depths of the West Country.

Mr. Appleton frowned. He was daydreaming again. He glanced at his watch. Already an hour had passed and it would soon be time for lunch. He could hear the clink of utensils as

Mrs. Grice laid the table in the dining-room. He shook his head and bent over the typescript again. It was true, he had noticed, after more than a week in the house, that he was not producing as much as in the past. He attributed it to the upsets of the past months and the newness of his unfamiliar routine in the country, but it was a fact also that the house was relaxing in the most delightful way. It was almost too comfortable in its assurance and cheerfulness and Mr. Appleton realized that this new malaise of inertia would have to be energetically fought against.

He pressed on with his corrections for another ten minutes and then found Mrs. Grice at his elbow.

"Lunch, sir, in a quarter of an hour, if you please."

"Thank you, Mrs. Grice."

He looked up, grateful for the woman's quiet efficiency, the well-bred gentility of her manner. With her neat clothes and the touch of white at throat and wrist she would have passed muster in almost any company. He wondered idly what her past history had been; but Mrs. Grice never volunteered any information and he had always been too polite to ask.

"I shall be in directly," he added, as she continued to hover in the background. He waited until the door had clicked to behind her before he made the last one or two corrections in his neat, precise hand and then capped his pen. As he rose to leave the room he was suddenly conscious of something offensive to his neat sense of order. Glancing back towards the window, through which the sun poured in benevolent serenity, he realized what it was.

The inner window sill which was of some old, dark wood, possibly oak he supposed, was made of a single beam six inches thick. It was obviously much older than the house of which it formed a part. But it was not this which was responsible for Mr.

Appleton's temporary irritation. The whole sill, he now found on closer inspection, was coated with a thick film of dust.

The sight was so at variance with the neatness of the rest of the room that Mr. Appleton felt it might possibly be an optical illusion; but no, as he tested it tentatively with the tip of one finger, he felt its gritty texture on his skin and there was the pallid imprint of his touch on the sill's surface. He clicked his teeth in positive annoyance. This was unlike Mrs. Grice and he would have to speak to her about it; Mr. Appleton was pathologically obsessed with the cleanliness and order of his surroundings and the state of the sill was an obvious breach in the otherwise carefully ordered household arrangements.

But Mrs. Grice was such a pleasant and normally efficient woman that he would have to be tactful in the way he mentioned it. He resolved to tackle the matter after lunch. It was such a trivial thing, really, but it would be as well to make his views known.

In the event Mr. Appleton waited until after dessert had been served, and he was appreciatively stirring the depths of his first cup of coffee before he mentioned the matter. Mr. Appleton's eyesight was not what it was, but he thought he detected a slight paling of Mrs. Grice's face. But she only drummed softly with her fingers on the back of one of the dining-room chairs.

"I wouldn't have mentioned it normally, Mrs. Grice, apart from the fact that it isn't like your way of going about things. I have no objection to a little dust here and there, from time to time, but the study must be kept in impeccable order. And the sun strikes across that sill so strongly that it makes it worse."

Mrs. Grice bit her lip and Mr. Appleton felt that perhaps he had been a little too harsh. And he hadn't meant to upset such a conscientious and pleasant worker.

So he added swiftly, before she could reply, "If you think I'm being unfair. . . ."

"It's not that, Mr. Appleton," said Mrs. Grice. "I'm annoyed with myself, really. I could have sworn that I attended to the sill when I dusted the room yesterday."

"Well, it's no great matter," said Mr. Appleton cheerfully, glad at having won his point without a scene. How he hated scenes. . . .

"Perhaps you could give it your attention when it's convenient. I thought it best to make my views known straight away."

"Certainly, Mr. Appleton," said Mrs. Grice in a subdued voice. "You are entitled to have the house as you want it and I'm only sorry you had cause to complain."

All the same there was a strange look on her face as she hurried out and once again Mr. Appleton regretted having spoken so sharply. After all, he could have cleared the sill himself with a few strokes of a duster; though in that case, why employ a housekeeper? He drank his coffee, poured a second cup from the silver pot, and banished the petty annoyance from his mind.

Back in his study that afternoon Mr. Appleton rapidly forgot the incident and found he was able to concentrate much more firmly on the work in hand. He was barely conscious of Mrs. Grice leaving his tea and biscuits at his elbow and it was almost dusk before he had finished typing and had gathered up the mass of completed sheets with suddenly aching hands. When he had stapled the chapters together and placed them ready for checking, he stood at the window for a while, conscious of the beauty of the dusk, the faint outlines of trees and bushes visible against the light from the road beyond.

Moved by a shadowy impulse he stepped to the casement and opened the window wide. He stood for almost a quarter of an hour lapped in the peace which came with the cool, damp air.

The following day was an unusual one in the familiar context of Mr. Appleton's life. He had a visit from the people who owned the manor house, whose boundaries abutted his back hedge, and who were in fact his next-door neighbours but one; the large timbered house flanked the road about a hundred yards from Mr. Appleton's own property. The visitors were a youngish couple, the man in his mid-forties, the woman about a decade junior, and they brought with them two children in their early teens.

Mrs. Grice was kept running to and fro with tea and cakes and while Mr. Appleton made polite talk with their elders, the youngsters could be heard exclaiming with pleasure as they wandered from room to room and discovered their host's treasures. Mr. Appleton had tea served in the study and he and his guests sat round a table abutting a circular window at the end of the big room. Despite Mr. Appleton's fears, the children were well behaved and an agreeable hour passed before the visitors departed, urging him to visit them the following week.

The host went with them to the gate and when he had returned to his own garden, musing agreeably on the small details of the not unwelcome interruption, his feet took him, somewhat of their own volition, down the flagged path at the side of the house. The sun shone fiercely, though it was long past five in the afternoon, and Mr. Appleton could hear the rasp of a saw from the orchard beyond. He noted, as he paused near the hedge, that a party of workmen were engaged in lopping or felling a group of trees about a hundred yards away from his own boundary. He stood

watching for a few minutes, lulled by the soft country voices, and then presently, as the dull bite of an axe began to reverberate through the garden, went back indoors.

Mrs. Grice had already cleared the tea-things and he bent to resume his seat at the desk when he let fall an exclamation that was normally foreign to his lips. The sun shone brightly through the casement and there once again was the sill thickly coated with dust. Mr. Appleton felt rage beginning to choke his throat; he was thinking mainly of what his visitors must have thought of his standards of tidiness but the emotion was so unlike him that he resumed his seat, shocked at his own reaction. When he looked at the window again he saw that someone or perhaps some blunt object had scribed a pattern in the dust.

He stooped to look closer and found, albeit its crooked formation, an unmistakable word. TREE the sill said, in wavering writing. Mr. Appleton's annoyance was increased twofold. He guessed that his visitors' children had seen the dust and were making their own pert, juvenile comments. Another gust of irritation swept him. He turned on his heel and quit the study. As he got near the kitchen he heard Mrs. Grice give a stifled scream. There were muffled exclamations from the garden beyond and a single loud report, like an explosion. Mr. Appleton ran into the garden to find Mrs. Grice before him; the two of them hurried towards the hedge.

The cause of the explosion was soon obvious. A large branch of a tree which the men in the orchard were lopping, had fallen. A ladder lay tumbled in the long grass and a figure was pinned beneath a tangle of branches. Mr. Appleton forced his way through the hedge with an energy that surprised himself. He saw that the tree was an elm and that the branch was a big one. A groaning noise came from out the boughs and the small knot of

men had their shoulders beneath and were lifting and pulling in a kind of compassionate chaos that Mr. Appleton found touching. He panted his way up to the group, conscious that he could really do little to help. A rope dangled uselessly from the tree. Easy to see how the little tragedy had happened.

A thickset man turned a white face to him as Mr. Appleton touched his shoulder.

"Can I help?" he said. And added, before the other could reply, "Is it bad?"

"Bad enough," said the thickset man shortly. He turned again to get his beefy shoulder under the branch. Mr. Appleton stood back and found Mrs. Grice behind him. She twisted her thin hands nervously but her eyes were bright and steady. Mr. Appleton was surprised to hear her say, "Let me have a look. I was a nurse. . . ."

The thickset man gave way readily to her and she had wriggled in beneath the mass of boughs to make her inspection. She came out and brushed some leaves off her skirt.

"It looks like a broken shoulder," she said, speaking to nobody and looking fixedly between Mr. Appleton and the thickset man.

"I'll telephone for an ambulance," said Mr. Appleton, glad of something to do.

It was an hour or more before the injured man was removed, and the ambulance was no sooner gone and he and Mrs. Grice enjoying a welcome cup of tea together in the kitchen than a shy young constable knocked at the side door with some questions. It was dark before Mrs. Grice left and Mr. Appleton made a makeshift dinner of cold meat and pickles in the kitchen nook, pondering on the events of what had been for him an extremely momentous day.

Mr. Appleton was actually reaching for his book, on the verge of stepping into bed, before he remembered the inscription on the window sill. The single cryptic word took on an undue significance in his brain. On a sudden impulse he flung on his dressing-gown. The house was silent except for the tick of a clock as he opened the study door. The soft lamplight shone on the calm appointments of the room. Shone too on a window sill that was gleaming and bare of dust.

A month passed away and the summer continued in a blaze of blue and gold. One afternoon Mr. Appleton had been down to the lower orchard; the season was reaching its full height and even the long grasses of the paddock appeared to be wilting with the heat. Their stems looked flaxen and of the consistency of metal in the baking air, which made the far distance of the hills which surrounded the village vibrate and dance in the haze. It was cool and fresh in the house after the almost tropical brilliance of the garden and Mr. Appleton paused momentarily on the tiled surface of the hall. When he had taken a glass of iced mineral water from the kitchen refrigerator he went through into the study; Mrs. Grice was out shopping and he had the place to himself.

He sat not at the desk today but in one of the large brown leather armchairs which flanked the hearth and sipped gratefully, conscious of the sensuous coolness of the glass's chill lip against his mouth and tongue. It was dark after the garden, but as Mr. Appleton's eyes gradually adjusted themselves to the change of light he was again conscious of the feeling of irritation which he was beginning to experience in this room. He glanced over towards the window and saw with a sense of familiarity that the sill was blurred with a fine coating of dust.

He pulled himself out of his chair, uncomfortably aware of the sweat trickling down inside his shirt. He leaned forward, half expecting what he found. It was just the one word, scraped into the dust, with the same crooked finger. This time it spelled out: WELL.

Mr. Appleton sat down abruptly in his chair again, aware that the perspiration which started from every pore was not entirely engendered by the heat of the day. He stared fixedly in front of him at the familiar contours of the stone fireplace, thinking deeply for perhaps twenty minutes. Then he got up heavily and sought a duster. He grimly wiped the sill clean of its enigmatic message and went back into the garden again. His steps took him towards the front gate this time and he became aware of a blue light which was flashing in the distance.

He turned out of the gate and walked aimlessly towards it. He then saw that the light came from the top of a grey-painted ambulance belonging to the County Council. There was a knot of people in the garden beyond and then in a moment or two a small group detached itself; men in dark uniforms carrying something on a sheeted stretcher. A child's limp arm dangled below the sheet like a broken doll. The face was covered.

The ambulance door slammed and the engine murmured into life. Still Mr. Appleton lingered, listening to broken fragments of conversation. His eyes went beyond the garden wall to a stone parapet, half-hidden among roses and honeysuckle. Mr. Appleton recognized the Vicar, his arm about a woman's shoulder. He felt faint suddenly and looked wildly about him. He pushed into the throng of people, glancing this way and that. A pink-faced constable was listening to three conversations at once, his sympathetic face knotted in concentration over his notebook.

"The child was playing and fell in the well," said an elderly

man in front of Mr. Appleton. "You can see where the cover gave way."

The voices began to recede in Mr. Appleton's ears in a most peculiar manner; he became aware that he had stumbled. Someone helped him up. Consciousness faded and he knew nothing more until he came around in his own kitchen to find Mrs. Grice's solicitous face before him. The constable was hovering by the table and Mr. Appleton's own doctor, a thickset, middle-aged character was saying, "Nothing serious. Just the effect of the heat, I think."

Mr. Appleton was relieved to hear the doctor's verdict but he was seriously shaken nevertheless. He refused Mrs. Grice's kind offer to stay the night. She lingered curiously when her usual time came for departure. Mr. Appleton sipped gratefully at his second small brandy and kept his gaze lowered at the floor of the dining-room. He was in pyjamas and dressing-gown but the heat still seemed to rise in tangible waves from the floor. Mr. Appleton felt words come awkwardly to his lips. He continued to keep his eyes lowered.

Then he said, "How did the previous owner of the house die?"

The words came out in a stumbling rush and Mrs. Grice looked startled, as well she might.

She stood shifting from one foot to the other and Mr. Appleton thought again how graceful and cool she looked. Her answer came at last.

"Heart, I believe, Mr. Appleton."

And then, when he had long given up any thought of further enlightenment, she added gently, standing in the dining-room doorway against the soft lamplight, "He was very old, you know."

It was a comforting thought and Mr. Appleton was oddly touched. He felt grateful and he rose to express his thanks. When he had bolted the door behind Mrs. Grice he crossed to the study and locked it for the first time since he had come to Dotterells. He lay awake thinking for a long time that night.

It was nearly three days before Mr. Appleton used the study again. He had been to London in the interim and had made some enquiries about the village, but as he was never able to speak clearly of the matters which so deeply troubled him, his researches achieved little. He walked round the house in the early afternoon before entering the study; he glanced through the window, conscious of the absurd figure he must have cut to any watcher, and nervously examined the sill on the inside. So far as he could make out it was completely free of dust.

He went in and sat down at his desk and started to write; there was silence for a long time, broken only by the brittle scratching of his nib. Presently Mr. Appleton paused, put down his pen, and rested a moment, one hand on his head. He was conscious of a subtle change in the room and at first was at some difficulty in placing it. Then he became aware, absurdly it seemed, that the scratching of his pen had continued after he had laid it down. And as soon as he became outwardly conscious of it, the sound ceased.

There was a fearful silence, worse than the minute interruption. Mr. Appleton moved his head ever so slowly towards the window. He saw quite without surprise that the sill was thickly coated with dust. Saw too the scraggly outline of something scratched into the gritty surface. He went over heavily and read what it said. The same distorted writing spelled out APPLE, followed by part of another letter. Mr. Appleton at first thought in terms of the orchard but then, on reflection, saw that

the upright of the next letter was an obvious continuation; the addition of a crosspiece would make it a T. It was the first part of his own name.

Mr. Appleton was conscious of a great weight on his heart; even breathing was an effort. The silence of the room was like a black cloud which made respiration difficult. Then a passing motor vehicle vibrated the windows and he moved again.

He went over and sat in one of the fireside chairs; he remained motionless for more than an hour, straining his ears for the slightest sound from the windows. Towards tea-time he heard the scratching again. He put off the moment as long as possible and then went over. The silent writer had completed the inscription of his own name.

Mr. Appleton went quickly out; his shirt was wringing wet and clung stickily to his back. He turned the key in the door behind him and went into the dining-room with an unnecessary speed and noise. Mrs. Grice looked surprised but said nothing. Somehow Mr. Appleton forced some tea and biscuits into his mouth, though he was unconscious of what he was eating. He had neither taste nor feeling at the moment. He sat with his spoon poised, his head on one side, as though he could hear the minutest sound from the study, now separated from him by two walls and the width of the corridor. Then Mrs. Grice came in and the spoon clattered loudly against the side of the cup.

The housekeeper's face looked white in the cool dimness of the dining-room, with its heavy oak furniture.

"I'm off now, Mr. Appleton," she said. "If there's anything else you want. . . ."

He made a perfunctory remark and waited until he heard her go into the kitchen. Then he was in the study, hardly noticing the

door was ajar, making for the window. He stared incredulously at the sill, his mind suddenly stirred to furious activity. He made a gasping noise in his throat; his heart started to pump heavily. He stared again at the window sill, unable to take in the implications of what he saw; then he looked out through the window. He began to run towards the door like a madman.

Mrs. Grice, on the opposite pavement, turned at his call. She saw her employer gesticulating wildly at the gate of the house. Mr. Appleton was not aware of the surprised faces about him in the street; he strode rapidly towards Mrs. Grice, one question only hanging tremulously on his tongue. He saw Mrs. Grice throw up her hands; there was a great noise in the sky and an intolerable pain in his body. The fading daylight changed to all the colours of the rainbow and he had time to note the horror on Mrs. Grice's face before all consciousness faded.

The jury returned a verdict of accidental death and the matter was closed, though the Coroner, a patient and prosaic sort of man, could not help observing that it was difficult to see why a gentleman of Mr. Appleton's ordered and temperate habits should rush headlong into the path of a heavy lorry which he had apparently neither seen nor heard. Indeed, other witnesses had testified that he had looked neither right nor left as he hurried into the road.

It was a minor mystery as mysteries go and though it remained for long a matter for speculation in the village, the jury preferred to deal with the available facts. Mr. Appleton's book appeared in the autumn and Mrs. Grice, though not addicted to what she felt was an essentially morbid type of literature, read it with great interest. If Mrs. Grice sometimes thinks of Mr. Appleton today it

is perhaps merely to reflect what could have upset him. For of course she had no way of knowing that her thoughtful action in dusting off the study window sill had erased the warning of his own death.



Camera Obscura





As Mr. Sharsted pushed his way up the narrow, fussily conceived lanes that led to the older part of the town, he was increasingly aware that there was something about Mr. Gingold he didn't like. It was not only the old-fashioned, outdated air of courtesy that irritated the money-lender, but the gentle, absent-minded way in which he continually put off settlement. Almost as if money were of no importance.

The money-lender hesitated even to say this to himself; the thought was a blasphemy that rocked the very foundations of his world. He pursed his lips grimly and set himself to mount the ill-paved and flinty roadway that bisected the hilly terrain of this remote part of the town.

The money-lender's narrow, lopsided face was perspiring under his hard hat; lank hair started from beneath the brim, which lent him a curious aspect. This, combined with the green-tinted spectacles he wore, gave him a sinister, decayed look, like someone long dead. The thought may have occurred to the few, scattered passers-by he met in the course of his ascent, for almost to a person they gave one cautious glance and then hurried on as though eager to be rid of his presence.

He turned in at a small courtyard and stood in the shelter of a great, old ruined church to catch his breath; his heart was thumping uncomfortably in the confines of his narrow chest and his breath rasped in his throat. Assuredly, he was out of condition, he told himself. Long hours of sedentary work huddled over his accounts were taking their toll; he really must get out more and take some exercise.

The money-lender's sallow face brightened momentarily, as he thought of his increasing prosperity, but then he frowned again as he remembered the purpose of his errand. Gingold must be made to toe the line, he told himself, as he set out over the last half-mile of his journey. If he couldn't raise the necessary cash there must be many valuables in that rambling old house of his which he could sell and realize on.

As Mr. Sharsted forged his way deeper into this forgotten corner of the town, the sun, which was low in the sky, seemed already to have set, the light was so constricted by the maze of small courts and alleys into which he had plunged. He was panting again when he came at last, abruptly, to a large green door, set crookedly at the top of a flight of time-worn steps. He stood arrested for a moment or two, one hand grasping the old balustrade, even his mean soul uplifted momentarily by the sight of the smoky haze of the town below, tilted beneath the yellow sky.

Everything seemed to be set awry upon this hill so that the very horizon rushed slanting across the far distance, giving the spectator a feeling of vertigo. A bell pealed faintly as he seized an iron scrollwork pull set into a metal rose alongside the front door. The money-lender's thoughts were turned to irritation again; everything about Mr. Gingold was peculiar, he felt. Even the fittings of his household were things one never saw elsewhere.

Though this might be an advantage if he ever gained control of Mr. Gingold's assets and had need to sell the property; there must be a lot of valuable stuff in this old house he had never seen, he mused. Which was another reason he felt it strange that the old man was unable to pay him his dues; he must have a great deal of money, if not in cash, in property, one way or another.

He found it difficult to realize why Mr. Gingold kept hedging over a matter of three hundred pounds; he could easily sell the place and go to live in a more attractive part of town in a modern, well-appointed villa and still keep his antiquarian interests. Mr. Sharsted sighed. Still, it was none of his business. All he was concerned with was the matter of the money; he had been kept waiting long enough and he wouldn't be fobbed off any longer. Gingold had got to settle by Monday or he'd make things unpleasant for him.

Mr. Sharsted's thin lips tightened in an ugly manner as he mused on, oblivious of the sunset staining the upper storeys of the old houses and dyeing the mean streets below the hill a rich carmine. He pulled the bell again impatiently, and this time the door was opened almost immediately. Mr. Gingold was a very tall, white-haired man with a gentle, almost apologetic manner. He stood slightly stooping in the doorway, blinking as though astonished at the sunlight, half afraid it would fade him if he allowed too much of it to absorb him.

His clothes, which were of good quality and cut, were untidy and sagged loosely on his big frame; they seemed washed out in the bright light of the sun and appeared to Mr. Sharsted to be all of a part with the man himself; indeed, Mr. Gingold was rinsed to a pale, insipid shade by the sunshine so that his white hair and face and clothing ran into one another, and somehow the different aspects of the picture became blurred and indeterminate.

To Mr. Sharsted he bore the aspect of an old photograph which had never been properly fixed and had turned brown and faded with time. Mr. Sharsted thought he might blow away with the breeze that had started up, but Mr. Gingold merely smiled shyly and said, "Oh, there you are, Sharsted, come on in," as though he had been expecting him all the time. Surprisingly, Mr. Gingold's eyes were of a marvellous shade of blue and they made his whole face come vividly alive, fighting and challenging the overall neutral tints of his clothing and features.

He led the way into a cavernous hall. Mr. Sharsted followed cautiously, his eyes adjusting with difficulty to the cool gloom of the interior. With courteous, old-world motions Mr. Gingold beckoned him forward. The two men ascended a finely carved staircase, whose balustrades, convoluted and serpentine, seemed to writhe sinuously upwards into the darkness.

"My business will only take a moment," protested Sharsted, anxious to present his ultimatum and depart. But Mr. Gingold merely continued to ascend the staircase.

"Come along, come along," he said gently, as though he hadn't heard Mr. Sharsted's expostulations. "You must take a glass of wine with me, I have so few visitors. . . ."

Mr. Sharsted looked about him curiously; he had never been in this part of the house. Usually, Mr. Gingold received his occasional callers in a big, cluttered room on the ground floor. This afternoon, for some reason known only to himself, he had chosen to show Mr. Sharsted another part of his domain. Mr. Sharsted thought that perhaps Mr. Gingold intended to settle the matter of his repayments. This might be where he transacted business, perhaps kept his money. His thin fingers twitched with nervous excitement.

They continued to ascend what seemed to the money-lender to be enormous distances. The staircase still unwound in front of their measured progress. From the little light which filtered in through rounded windows, Sharsted caught occasional glimpses of objects that aroused his professional curiosity and acquisitive sense. Here a large oil painting swung into view round the bend of the stairs; in the necessarily brief glance that Mr. Sharsted caught, he would have sworn it was a Poussin. A moment later a large sideboard laden with porcelain slid by the corner of his eye. He stumbled on the stair as he glanced back over his shoulder, and in so doing, almost missed a rare suit of Genoese armour which stood concealed in a niche set back from the staircase.

The money-lender had reached a state of confused bewilderment when at length Mr. Gingold flung aside a large mahogany door, high up in the house, and motioned him forward. Mr. Gingold must be a wealthy man and could easily realize enormous amounts on any one of the objets d'art Sharsted had seen; why then, thought the latter, did he find it necessary to borrow so frequently, and why was it so difficult to obtain repayment? With interest, the sum owed Sharsted had now risen to a considerable figure; Mr. Gingold must be a buyer of rare items.

Allied to the general shabbiness of the house as seen by the casual visitor, it must mean that his collector's instinct would refuse to allow him to part with anything once bought, which had made him run himself into debt. The money-lender's lips tightened again; well, he must be made to settle his debts like anyone else. If not, perhaps Sharsted could force him to part with something—porcelain, a picture—that could be made to realize a handsome profit on the deal. Business was business and Gingold

could not expect him to wait forever. His musings were interrupted by a query from his host and Sharsted muttered an apology as he saw that Mr. Gingold was waiting, one hand on the neck of a heavy silver and crystal decanter.

“Yes, yes, a sherry, thank you,” he murmured in confusion, moving awkwardly. The light was so bad in this place that he felt it difficult to focus his eyes, and objects had a habit of shifting and billowing as though seen under water. Mr. Sharsted was forced to wear tinted spectacles, as his eyes had been weak from childhood. They made these apartments seem twice as dark as they might be. But though Mr. Sharsted squinted over the top of his lenses as Mr. Gingold poured the sherry, he still could not make out objects clearly. He really would have to consult his oculist soon, if this trouble continued.

His voice sounded hollow to his own ears as he ventured a commonplace when Mr. Gingold handed him the glass. He sat down gingerly on a ladder-back chair indicated to him by Mr. Gingold, and sipped at the amber liquid in a hesitant fashion. It tasted uncommonly good, but this unexpected hospitality was putting him on a wrong footing with Gingold. He must assert himself and broach the subject of his business. But he felt a curious reluctance and merely sat on in embarrassed silence, one hand round the stem of his goblet, listening to the soothing tick of an old clock, which was the only thing which broke the silence.

He saw now that he was in a large apartment, expensively furnished, which must be high up in the house, under the eaves. Hardly a sound from outside penetrated the windows, which were hung with thick blue velvet curtains; the parquet floor was covered with exquisitely worked Chinese rugs and the room was apparently divided in half by heavy velvet curtains to match those which masked the windows. Mr. Gingold said little but sat at a

large mahogany table, tapping his sherry glass with long fingers; his bright blue eyes looked with mild interest at Mr. Sharsted as they spoke of everyday matters.

At last Mr. Sharsted was moved to broach the object of his visit. He spoke of the long-outstanding sum which he had advanced to Mr. Gingold, of the continued applications for settlement, and of the necessity of securing early payment. Strangely, as Mr. Sharsted progressed, his voice began to stammer and eventually he was at a loss for words; normally, as working-class people in the town had reason to know, he was brusque, business-like, and ruthless. He never hesitated to distrain on debtor's goods, or to evict if necessary, and that he was the object of universal hatred in the outside world bothered him not in the slightest. In fact he felt it to be an asset; his reputation in business affairs preceded him, as it were, and acted as an incentive to prompt repayment.

If people were fool enough to be poor or run into debt and couldn't meet their dues, well then, let them; it was all grist to his mill and he could not be expected to run his business on a lot of sentimental nonsense. He felt more irritated with Mr. Gingold than he need have been, for his money was obviously safe; but what continued to baffle him was the man's gentle docility, his obvious wealth, and his reluctance to settle his debts.

Something of this must have eventually permeated his conversation, for Mr. Gingold shifted in his seat, made no comment whatever on Mr. Sharsted's pressing demands, and only said, in another of his softly spoken sentences, "Do have another sherry, Mr. Sharsted."

The money-lender felt all the strength going out of him, as he weakly assented. He leaned back on his comfortable chair with a swimming head and allowed the second glass to be pressed into

his hand, the thread of his discourse completely lost. He mentally cursed himself for a dithering fool and tried to concentrate, but Mr. Gingold's benevolent smile, the curious way the objects in the room shifted and wavered in the heat haze, the general gloom and the discreet curtaining, came more and more to weigh on and oppress his spirits.

So it was with something like relief that Sharsted saw his host rise from the table. He had not changed the topic but continued to speak as though Mr. Sharsted had never mentioned money to him at all; he merely ignored the whole situation and with an enthusiasm Sharsted found difficult to share, murmured soothingly on about Chinese wall paintings, a subject of which Mr. Sharsted knew nothing. He found his eyes closing and with an effort opened them again.

Mr. Gingold was saying, "I think this will interest you, Mr. Sharsted. Come along. . . ."

His host had moved forward and the money-lender, following him down the room, saw that the large expanse of velvet curtaining was in motion. The two men walked through the parted curtains which closed behind them, and Mr. Sharsted then saw that they were in a semicircular chamber.

This room was, if anything, even dimmer than the one they had just left. But the money-lender's interest began to revive; his head felt clearer and he took in a large circular table, some brass wheels and levers which winked in the gloom, and a long shaft which went up to the ceiling.

"This has almost become an obsession with me," murmured Mr. Gingold, as though apologizing to his guest. "You are aware of the principles of the camera obscura, Mr. Sharsted?"

The money-lender pondered slowly, reaching back into memory.

"Some sort of Victorian toy, isn't it?" he said at length. Mr. Gingold looked pained, but the expression of his voice did not change.

"Hardly that, Mr. Sharsted," he rejoined. "A most fascinating pursuit. Few people of my acquaintance have been here and seen what you are going to see."

He motioned to the shafting, which passed up through a louvre in the ceiling.

"These controls are coupled to the system of lenses and prisms on the roof. As you will see, the hidden camera, as the Victorian scientists came to call it, gathers a panorama of the town below and transmits it here onto the viewing table. An absorbing study, one's fellow man, don't you think? I spend many hours up here."

Mr. Sharsted had never heard Mr. Gingold in such a talkative mood and now that the wretchedness which had assailed him earlier had disappeared, he felt more suited to tackle him about his debts. First, he would humour him by feigning interest in his stupid toy. But Mr. Sharsted had to admit, almost with a gasp of surprise, that Mr. Gingold's obsession had a valid cause.

For suddenly, as Mr. Gingold moved his hand upon the lever, the room was flooded with light of a blinding clarity and the money-lender saw why gloom was a necessity in this chamber. Presumably a shutter over the camera obscura slid away upon the rooftop and almost at the same moment, a panel in the ceiling opened to admit a shaft of light directed upon the table before them.

In a second of God-like vision, Mr. Sharsted saw a panorama of part of the old town spread out before him in superbly natural colour. Here were the quaint, cobbled streets dropping to the valley, with the blue hills beyond; factory chimneys smoked in

the early evening air; people went about their business in half a hundred roads; distant traffic went noiselessly on its way; once even, a great white bird soared across the field of view, so apparently close, that Mr. Sharsted started back from the table.

Mr. Gingold gave a dry chuckle and moved a brass wheel at his elbow. The viewpoint abruptly shifted and Mr. Sharsted saw with another gasp, a sparkling vista of the estuary with a big coaling ship moving slowly out to sea. Gulls soared in the foreground and the sullen wash of the tide ringed the shore. Mr. Sharsted, his errand quite forgotten, was fascinated. Half an hour must have passed, each view more enchanting than the last; from this height, the squalor of the town was quite transformed.

He was abruptly recalled to the present, however, by the latest of the views; Mr. Gingold spun the control for the last time and a huddle of crumbling tenements wheeled into view.

"The former home of Mrs. Thwaites, I believe?" said Mr. Gingold mildly.

Mr. Sharsted flushed and bit his lip in anger. The Thwaites business had aroused more notoriety than he had intended; the woman had borrowed a greater sum than she could afford, the interest mounted, she borrowed again: could he help it if she had a tubercular husband and three children? He had to make an example of her in order to keep his other clients in line; now there was a distraint on the furniture and the Thwaites were being turned onto the street. Could he help this? If only people would repay their debts all would be well; he wasn't a philanthropic institution, he told himself angrily.

And at this reference to what was rapidly becoming a scandal in the town, all his smouldering resentment against Mr. Gingold broke out afresh; enough of all these views and childish playthings. Camera obscura indeed; if Mr. Gingold did not meet

his obligations like a gentleman he could sell this pretty toy to meet his debt. He controlled himself with an effort as he turned to meet Mr. Gingold's gently ironic gaze.

"Ah, yes," said Mr. Sharsted. "The Thwaites business is my affair, Mr. Gingold. Will you please confine yourself to the matter in hand. I have had to come here again at great inconvenience; I must tell you that if three hundred pounds, representing the current instalment on our loan, is not forthcoming by Monday, I shall be obliged to take legal action."

Mr. Sharsted's cheeks were burning and his voice trembled as he pronounced these words; if he expected a violent reaction from Mr. Gingold, he was disappointed. The latter merely gazed at him in mute reproach.

"That is your last word?" he said regretfully. "You will not reconsider?"

"Certainly not," snapped Mr. Sharsted. "I must have the money by Monday."

"You misunderstand me, Mr. Sharsted," said Mr. Gingold, still in that irritatingly mild voice. "I was referring to Mrs. Thwaites. Must you carry on with this unnecessary and somewhat inhuman action? I would. . . ."

"Please mind your own business!" retorted Mr. Sharsted, exasperated beyond measure. "Mind what I say. . . ."

He looked wildly about for the door through which he had entered.

"That is your last word?" said Mr. Gingold again. One look at the money-lender's set, white face was his mute answer.

"Very well, then," said Mr. Gingold with a heavy sigh. "So be it. I will see you on your way."

He moved forward again, pulling a heavy velvet cloth over the table of the camera obscura. The louvre in the ceiling closed with

a barely audible rumble. To Mr. Sharsted's surprise, he found himself following his host up yet another flight of stairs; these were of stone, fringed with an iron balustrade which was cold to the touch. His anger was now subsiding as quickly as it had come; he was already regretting losing his temper over the Thwaites business and he hadn't intended to sound so crude and cold-blooded. What must Mr. Gingold think of him? Strange how the story could have got to his ears; surprising how much information about the outside world a recluse could obtain just by sitting still. Though on this hill, he supposed Mr. Gingold could be said to be at the centre of things.

He shuddered suddenly, for the air seemed to have grown cold. Through a slit in the stone wall he could see the evening sky was already darkening. He really must be on his way; how did the old fool expect him to find his way out when they were still mounting to the very top of the house?

Mr. Sharsted regretted, too, that in antagonizing Mr. Gingold, he might have made it even more difficult to recover his money; it was almost as though, in mentioning Mrs. Thwaites and trying to take her part, he had been trying a form of subtle blackmail. He would not have expected it of Gingold; it was not like him to meddle in other people's affairs. If he was so fond of the poor and needy he could well afford to advance the family some money himself to tide them over their difficulties.

His brain seething with these confused and angry thoughts, Mr. Sharsted, panting and dishevelled, now found himself on a worn stone platform where Mr. Gingold was putting the key into an ancient wooden lock.

"My workshop," he explained, with a shy smile to Mr. Sharsted, who felt his tension eased away by this drop in the emotional atmosphere. Looking through an old, nearly triangular

window in front of him, Mr. Sharsted could see that they were in a small, turreted superstructure which towered a good twenty feet over the main roof of the house. There was a sprawl of unfamiliar alleys at the foot of the steep overhang of the building, as far as he could make out through the grimy panes.

“There is a staircase down the outside,” explained Mr. Gingold, opening the door. “It will lead you down the other side of the hill and cut over half a mile off your journey.”

The money-lender felt a sudden rush of relief at this. He had come almost to fear this deceptively mild and quiet old man who, though he said little and threatened not at all, had begun to exude a faint air of menace to Mr. Sharsted’s now overheated imagination.

“But first,” said Mr. Gingold, taking the other man’s arm in a surprisingly powerful grip. “I want to show you something else—and this really has been seen by very few people indeed.”

Mr. Sharsted looked at the other quickly, but could read nothing in Mr. Gingold’s enigmatic blue eyes. He was surprised to find a similar, though smaller chamber to the one they had just left. There was another table, another shaft ascending to a domed cupola in the ceiling, and a further arrangement of wheels and tubes.

“This camera obscura,” said Mr. Gingold, “is a very rare model, to be sure. In fact, I believe there are only three in existence today and one of those is in Northern Italy.”

Mr. Sharsted cleared his throat and made a noncommittal reply.

“I felt sure you would like to see this before you leave,” said Mr. Gingold softly. “You are quite sure you won’t change your mind?” he added, almost inaudibly as he bent to the levers.

“About Mrs. Thwaites, I mean?”

Sharsted felt another sudden spurt of anger, but kept his feelings under control.

"I'm sorry," he began.

"No matter," said Mr. Gingold regretfully. "I only wanted to make sure, before we had a look at this." He laid his hand with infinite tenderness on Mr. Sharsted's shoulder as he drew him forward.

He pressed the lever and Mr. Sharsted almost cried out with the suddenness of the vision. He was God; the world was spread out before him in a crazy pattern, or at least the segment of it representing the part of the town surrounding the house in which he stood. He viewed it from a great height, as a man might from an aeroplane; though nothing was quite in perspective. The picture was of enormous clarity; it was like looking into an old cheval glass which had a faint distorting quality.

There was something oblique and elliptical about the sprawl of alleys and roads that spread about the foot of the hill. The shadows were mauve and violet and the extremes of the picture were still tinged with the blood red of the dying sun. It was an appalling, cataclysmic vision and Mr. Sharsted was shattered; he felt suspended in space and almost cried out at the dizziness of the height. When Mr. Gingold twirled the wheel and the picture slowly began to revolve, Mr. Sharsted did cry out and had to clutch at the back of a chair to prevent himself from falling.

He was perturbed, too, as he caught a glimpse of a big, white building in the foreground of the picture.

"I thought that was the old Corn Exchange," he said in bewilderment. "Surely that burned down before the last war?"

"Eigh," said Mr. Gingold, as though he hadn't heard.

"It doesn't matter," said Mr. Sharsted, who now felt quite confused and ill. It must be the combination of the sherry and the

enormous height at which he was viewing the vision in the camera obscura. It was a demoniacal toy and he shrank away from the figure of Mr. Gingold, which looked somewhat sinister in the blood-red and mauve light reflected from the image in the polished table surface.

"I thought you'd like to see this one," said Mr. Gingold in that same maddening, insipid voice. "It's really special, isn't it? Quite the best of the two. You can see all sorts of things that are normally hidden."

As he spoke there appeared on the screen two old buildings which Mr. Sharsted was sure had been destroyed during the war; in fact Mr. Sharsted was certain that a public garden and car park had now been erected on the site. His mouth suddenly became dry; he was not sure whether he had drunk too much sherry or the heat of the day had been too much for him.

He had been about to make a sharp remark that the sale of the camera obscura would liquidate Mr. Gingold's debt, but he felt sure this would not be a wise comment to make at this juncture. He felt faint, his brow went hot and cold, and Mr. Gingold was at his side in an instant.

Mr. Sharsted became aware that the picture had faded from the table and that the day was rapidly turning to dusk outside the dusty windows.

"I really must be going," he said with feeble desperation, trying to free himself from Mr. Gingold's quietly persistent grip.

"Certainly, Mr. Sharsted," said his host. "This way." He led him without ceremony over to a small oval doorway in a corner of the far wall.

"Just go down the stairs. It will bring you onto the street. Please slam the bottom door—it will lock itself." As he spoke, he opened the door and Mr. Sharsted saw a flight of clean, dry stone

steps leading downwards. Light still flooded in from windows set in the circular walls. Mr. Gingold did not offer his hand and Mr. Sharsted stood rather awkwardly, holding the door ajar.

"Until Monday, then," he said. Mr. Gingold flatly ignored this. "Good-night, Mr. Gingold," said the money-lender with nervous haste, anxious to be gone.

"Good-bye, Mr. Sharsted," said Mr. Gingold with kind finality.

Mr. Sharsted almost thrust himself through the door and nervously fled down the staircase, mentally cursing himself for all sorts of a fool. His feet beat a rapid tattoo that echoed eerily up and down the old tower. Fortunately, there was still plenty of light; this would be a nasty place in the dark. He slowed his pace after a few moments and thought bitterly of the way he had allowed old Gingold to gain the ascendancy over him; and what an impertinence of the man to interfere in the matter of the Thwaites woman. He would see what sort of man Mr. Sharsted was when Monday came and the eviction went according to plan. Monday would also be a day of reckoning for Mr. Gingold—it was a day which they would both remember and Mr. Sharsted felt himself quite looking forward to it. He quickened his pace again, and presently found himself confronted by a thick oak door.

It gave beneath his hand as he lifted the big, well-oiled catch and the next moment he was in a high-walled alley leading to the street. The door slammed hollowly behind him and he breathed in the cool evening air with a sigh of relief. He jammed his hard hat back onto his head and strode out over the cobbles, as though to affirm the solidity of the outside world.

Once in the street, which seemed somewhat unfamiliar to him, he hesitated which way to go and then set off to the right. He remembered that Mr. Gingold had told him that this way took

him over the other side of the hill; he had never been in this part of the town and the walk would do him good.

The sun had quite gone and a thin sliver of moon was showing in the early evening sky. There seemed few people about and when, ten minutes later, Mr. Sharsted came out into a large square which had five or six roads leading off it, he determined to ask the correct way back to his part of the town. With luck he could catch a tram, for he had now had enough of walking for one day.

There was a large, smoke-grimed chapel on a corner of this square and as Mr. Sharsted passed it, he caught a glimpse of a board with gold-painted letters. NINIAN'S REVIVALIST BROTHERHOOD, it said. The date, in flaked gold paint, was 1925. Mr. Sharsted walked on and selected the most important of the roads which faced him. It was getting quite dark and the lamps had not yet been lit on this part of the hill. As he went farther down, the buildings closed in about his head, and the lights of the town below disappeared.

Mr. Sharsted felt lost and a little forlorn. Due, no doubt, to the faintly incredible atmosphere of Mr. Gingold's big house. He determined to ask the next passer-by for the right direction, but for the moment he couldn't see anyone about; the absence of street lights also bothered him. The municipal authorities must have overlooked this section when they switched on at dusk, unless it came under the jurisdiction of another body.

Mr. Sharsted was musing in this manner when he turned the corner of a narrow street and came out opposite a large, white building that looked familiar. For years Mr. Sharsted had had a picture of it on the yearly calendar sent by a local tradesman, which used to hang in his office. He gazed at its façade with mounting bewilderment as he approached. The title: CORN

EXCHANGE winked back dully in the moonlight as he got near enough to make out the lettering.

Mr. Sharsted's bewilderment changed to distinct unease as he thought frantically that he had already seen this building once before this evening, in the image captured by the lens of Mr. Gingold's second camera obscura. And he knew, with numbing certainty, that the old Corn Exchange had burned down in the late thirties. He swallowed heavily, and hurried on; there was something devilishly wrong, unless he were the victim of an optical illusion engendered by the violence of his thoughts, the unaccustomed walking he had done that day, and the two glasses of sherry.

He had the uncomfortable feeling that Mr. Gingold might be watching him at that very moment, on the table of his camera obscura, and at the thought a cold sweat burst out on his forehead. He sent himself forward at a smart trot and had soon left the Corn Exchange far behind. In the distance he heard the sharp clapping and the grating rattle of a horse and cart, but as he gained the entrance of an alley, he was disappointed to see its shadow disappear round the corner into the next road. He still could not see any people about and again had difficulty in fixing his position in relation to the town.

He set off once more, with a show of determination he was far from feeling, and five minutes later arrived in the middle of a square which was already familiar to him. There was a chapel on the corner and Mr. Sharsted read for the second time that evening the legend: NINIAN'S REVIVALIST BROTHERHOOD.

He stamped his foot in anger. He had walked quite three miles and had been fool enough to describe a complete circle; here he was, not five minutes from Gingold's house, where he had set out, nearly an hour before. He pulled out his watch at this and

was surprised to find it was only a quarter past six, though he could have sworn this was the time he had left Gingold. Though it could have been a quarter past five; he hardly knew what he was doing this afternoon. He shook it to make sure it was still going and then replaced it in his pocket.

His feet beat the pavement in his fury as he ran down the length of the square. This time he wouldn't make the same silly mistake. He unhesitatingly chose a large, well-kept metalled road that ran fair and square in the direction he knew must take him back to the centre of the town. He found himself humming a little tune under his breath. As he turned the next corner, his confidence increased.

Lights burned brightly on every hand; the authorities must have realized their mistake and finally switched on. But again he was mistaken; there was a little cart parked at the side of the road, with a horse in the shafts. An old man mounted a ladder set against a lamp post and Mr. Sharsted saw the thin blue flame in the gloom and then the mellow blossoming of the gas lamp.

Now he felt irritated again; what an incredibly archaic part of the town old Gingold lived in. It would just suit him. Gas lamps! And what a system of lighting them; Sharsted thought this method had gone out with the Ark. Nevertheless, he was most polite.

"Good-evening," he said, and the figure at the top of the lamp post stirred uneasily. The face was in deep shadow.

"Good-evening, sir," the lamplighter said in a muffled voice. He started climbing down.

"Could you direct me to the town centre?" said Mr. Sharsted with simulated confidence. He took a couple of paces forward and was then arrested with shock. There was a strange, sickly stench which reminded him of something he was unable to place. Really,

the drains in this place were terrible; he certainly would have to write to the town hall about this backward part of the locality.

The lamplighter had descended to the ground now and he put something down in the back of his cart; the horse shifted uneasily and again Mr. Sharsted caught the charnel stench, sickly-sweet on the summer air.

“This is the town centre as far as I know, sir,” said the lamplighter. As he spoke he stepped forward, and the pale lamplight fell onto his face, which had been in shadow before. Mr. Sharsted no longer waited to ask for any more directions but set off down the road at breakneck speed, not sure whether the green pallor of the man’s face was due to a terrible suspicion or to the green-tinted glasses he wore.

What he was certain of was that something like a mass of writhing worms projected below the man’s cap, where his hair would normally have been. Mr. Sharsted hadn’t waited to find out if this Medusa-like supposition was correct; beneath his hideous fear burned a savage anger at Gingold, whom somehow he suspected to be at the back of all these troubles. Mr. Sharsted fervently hoped that he might soon wake to find himself at home in bed, ready to begin the day that had ended so ignominiously at Gingold’s, but even as he formulated the thought, he knew this was reality. This cold moonlight, the hard pavement, his frantic flight, and the breath rasping and sobbing in his throat.

As the mist cleared from in front of his eyes he slowed to a walk and then found himself in the middle of a square; he knew where he was and had to force his nerves into a terrible, unnatural calm, just this side of despair. He walked with controlled casualness past the legend, NINIAN’S REVIVALIST BROTHERHOOD, and this time chose the most unlikely road of all, little more than a narrow alley that appeared to lead in the wrong direction.

Mr. Sharsted was willing to try anything which would lead him off this terrifying, accursed hill. There were no lights here and his feet stumbled on the rough stones and flints of the unmade roadway, but at least he was going downhill and the track gradually spiralled until he was in the right direction.

For some little while Mr. Sharsted had heard faint, elusive stirrings in the darkness about him and once he was startled to hear, some way ahead of him, a muffled cough. At least there were other people about at last, he thought, and he was comforted too, to see far ahead of him the dim lights of the town. As he grew nearer, Mr. Sharsted recovered his spirits and was relieved to see that they did not recede from him, as he had half suspected they might. The shapes about him, too, were solid enough. Their feet rang hollow on the roadway; evidently they were on their way to a meeting.

As Mr. Sharsted came under the light of the first lamp his earlier panic fear had abated. He still couldn't recognize exactly where he was, but the trim villas they were passing were more reminiscent of the town proper. Mr. Sharsted stepped up onto the pavement when they reached the well-lit area and in so doing, cannoned into a large, well-built man who had just emerged from a gateway to join the throng in the roadway.

Mr. Sharsted staggered under the impact and once again his nostrils caught the sickly sweet perfume of decay. The man caught him by the front of the coat to prevent him from falling.

"Evening, Mordecai," he said in a thick voice. "I thought you'd be coming, sooner or later."

Mr. Sharsted could not resist a cry of bubbling terror. It was not just the greenish pallor of the man's face or the rotted, leathery lips drawn back from the decayed teeth. He fell back against the fence as Abel Joyce passed on—Abel Joyce, a fellow

money-lender and usurer who had died in the nineteen-twenties and whose funeral Mr. Sharsted had attended. Blackness was about him as he rushed away, a sobbing whistle in his throat.

He was beginning to understand Mr. Gingold and that devilish camera obscura. The lost and the damned. He began to babble to himself under his breath. Now and again he cast a sidelong glimpse at his companions as he ran; there was old Mrs. Sanderson, who used to lay out corpses and rob her charges; there Grayson, the estate agent and undertaker; Amos, the war profiteer; Drucker, a swindler, all green of pallor and bearing with them the charnel stench. All people Mr. Sharsted had business with at one time or another and all of whom had one thing in common; without exception all had been dead for quite a number of years. Mr. Sharsted stuffed his handkerchief over his mouth to blot out that unbearable odour and heard the mocking laughter as his racing feet carried him past.

"Evening, Mordecai," they said. "We thought you'd be joining us."

Mr. Gingold equated him with these ghouls, he sobbed, as he ran on at headlong speed; if only he could make him understand. Sharsted didn't deserve such treatment. He was a businessman, not like these bloodsuckers on society. The lost and the damned. Now he knew why the Corn Exchange still stood and why the town was unfamiliar. It existed only in the eye of the camera obscura. Now he knew that Mr. Gingold had been trying to give him a last chance and why he had said good-bye, instead of good-night.

There was just one hope; if he could find the door back to Mr. Gingold's perhaps he could make him change his mind. Mr. Sharsted's feet flew over the cobbles as he thought of this, his hat fell down and he scraped his hands against the wall; he left the

walking corpses far behind, but though he was now looking for the familiar square he seemed to be finding his way back to the Corn Exchange.

He stopped for a moment to regain his breath. He must work this out logically. How had it happened before? Why of course, by walking away from the desired destination. Mr. Sharsted turned back and set himself to walk towards the lights. Though terrified, he did not despair, now that he knew what he was up against. He felt himself a match for Mr. Gingold. If only he could find the door!

As he reached the warm circle cast by the glow of the street lamps, Mr. Sharsted breathed a sigh of relief. For as he turned a corner there was the big square, with the soot-grimed chapel on the corner. He hurried on. He must remember exactly the turnings he had taken; he couldn't afford to make a mistake. So much depended on it. If only he could have another chance—he would let the Thwaites family keep their house, he would even be willing to forget Gingold's debt. He couldn't face the possibility of walking these endless streets for how long? And with the creatures he had seen. . . .

Mr. Sharsted groaned as he remembered the face of one old woman he had seen earlier that evening—or what was left of that face, after years of wind and weather. He suddenly recalled that she had died before the 1914 war. The sweat burst out on his forehead and he tried not to think of it.

Once off the square, he plunged into the alley he remembered. Ah! there it was. Now all he had to do was to go to the left and there was the door. His heart beat higher and he began to hope, with a sick longing, for the security of his well-appointed house and his rows of friendly ledgers. Only one corner. He ran on and turned up the road towards Mr. Gingold's door.

Another thirty yards to the peace of the ordinary world. The moonlight winked on a wide, well-paved square. Shone too on a legend painted in gold-leaf on a large board: NINIAN'S REVIVALIST BROTHERHOOD. The date was 1925.

Mr. Sharsted gave a hideous yell of fear and despair and fell to the pavement.

Mr. Gingold sighed heavily and yawned. He glanced at the clock. It was time for bed. He went over once again and stared into the camera obscura. It had been a not altogether unsuccessful day. He put a black velvet cloth over the image in the lens and went off slowly to his bed.

Under the lens, in pitiless detail, was reflected the narrow tangle of streets round Mr. Gingold's house, seen as through the eye of God; there went Mr. Sharsted and his colleagues, the lost and the damned, trapped for eternity, stumbling, weeping, swearing as they slipped and scrabbled along the alleys and squares of their own private hell, under the pale light of the stars.



The Janissaries of Emilion





He awoke, for the third consecutive occasion at dawn, sweating and terrified, with the details of the dream vivid in his mind. His hands were clutching the simple iron frame of the bedstead above his head and the dews of his night terror had soaked the linen of the bedding so profusely that he could not believe it was simply the result of the heat of the summer air.

He lay quietly, taking in the soothing details of the plainly furnished room, with its restful cream walls. It was just turned five and the solitary calls of newly awakened birds were beginning to penetrate from the green wall of the garden, but his ears still seemed lapped in the soft susurrus of the surf.

The dream had begun in a very casual and haphazard manner but its details had tended to clarify and repeat themselves on subsequent occasions, so that each repetition added a strata to his consciousness, as an artist adds pigment at the successive stages of a painting.

It was not until much later that Farlow had been admitted to Greenmansion, which was, not to put too fine a point on it, a luxuriously appointed mental home. The Superintendent had kept copious notes on the case, which interested him very much

indeed, but for obvious reasons the denouement of the affair had been kept from the attention of the larger world.

Farlow was an old friend of mine and I have pieced the story together as it was told me over a longish space of time, both from his own lips and from those of the Superintendent, Dr. Sondquist, a psychiatrist of great sympathy and brilliance, who had been responsible for some spectacular cures. Farlow was an extraordinary man in many ways; hypersensitive perhaps, but a genius in his line—that of higher physics—and it was at his own request that he had been admitted as a private patient to Greenmansion, for “rest and observation.” I visited him there on many occasions, as often as my own duties permitted, but I had heard the beginning of his story long before he took what his friends considered this last drastic step. It was as strange a tale in its way as I had ever heard and, considering its bizarre and horrible end, a remarkable one.

It had begun, he told me, in the most prosaic and ordinary manner. It had been just six months before and he had perhaps, as he put it, been rather overdoing things; long hours in the laboratory, hurried lunches and evenings devoted to calculus had developed both nerves and mind to a high pitch of strain and sensitivity. He had come home tired out one evening and after several hours of fruitless calculation on his current abstruse problem, he had put down the elaborate figures for the night.

By now it was past one o'clock in the morning and not the best time for a heavy meal, followed by almost a pint of black coffee. Be that as it may Farlow had eaten little since midday and he was the last man to bother about what he put in his insides. The demands of science had left him little time for seeking the company of the gentler sex, and so he had never married; his

simple needs were looked after by a housekeeper of dour aspect but efficient habits, and she went off duty at nine o'clock.

So Farlow made this heavy and ill-advised meal, swallowed the coffee, and made his way slowly to bed, his head throbbing with exhaustion, his mind chagrined at the results of his long labours over the elusive problem. Not unnaturally he slept badly, and it must have been at least 3:00 A.M. before sleep finally found him. But suddenly, it seemed to him, he was wide awake. I should imagine we have all had that sort of experience at one time or another. It is simply that we are dreaming that we are awake. We believe ourselves to be awake but subconsciously know ourselves to be still within the dream. I put this to Farlow the first time he started to unburden himself to me on the subject. That was not so, he said. Though he was within the dream he knew himself to be awake.

Everything was so vividly real; every touch and sensation of this often-repeated dream was so actually realized that it was his own room and everyday life that afterwards seemed so dim and faded. It was as if he had at night escaped to another life which was more immediate and more exciting than the world of reality. That his dream-world was a place of terror and fear for him, was neither here nor there. Farlow also believed in the physical reality of this world, though he had subsequently studied maps and atlases of obscure parts of the world in vain.

And despite the fact that the aspects of what I will continue to call his dream-world bore this terrible air of menace, Farlow was convinced that if he could but overcome the sinister shadows of the dream he could be happier than any man could hope to be in the everyday world of ordinary life. Now, I must emphasize, at this point, that Farlow was as sane as you or I; possibly saner, for

his work as a scientist compelled him to weigh every grain of truth and to proceed to his results by empirical methods. At no time, even during his sojourn in Greenmansion, did he exceed the normal, according to Dr. Sondquist, save in this one matter of the dream.

And that was something no one was in a position to disprove save Farlow himself; for he was the one who was experiencing the reality of this vision. Judging by the end of it all, Farlow was possibly the sanest man among us. And if that were so, what terrors lie in wait just behind the curtain of what we call consciousness may well give pause to the boldest of us, when criticizing a man like Farlow. It was my own belief that in his refined and hypersensitive way he had merely gone beyond the stage arrived at by the norm of coarser mortals, and a veil had been torn aside or breached in some unusual manner.

To put it more simply, what happened was this. It was just ten-past three when Farlow was last awake, for he switched on the light and looked at his bedside clock. At the conclusion of his dream, for reasons which will be apparent later, he again switched on his light and the time was only twenty-past three. Yet Farlow, with all the gravity of which a scientist is capable, assured me solemnly that he had been away for more than three hours. It was a ridiculous assertion, on the surface that is, for we all know that a second or two in a dream may be stretched to eternity for the sleeper; and in the split second before awakening at a heavy noise, the brain may substitute a whole chain of events in a minute space of time, to account for the sound.

Be that as it may and bearing in mind Farlow's own remarks on the aftermath of the dream, which I would not for one moment doubt, I am inclined to believe him. He slept and yet he awoke a short while afterwards and this is what he experienced. He was

cold; he was in water and he was, or had been a little before, in deadly danger of his life. His mouth was soaked with moisture and salt and he coughed heavily as he thrashed feebly about in shallow water. He felt the rough kiss of sand between his bare toes and when he opened his eyes he found himself in the shallows of a wild, bleak shore. Exhaustedly, he started to drag himself onto a long beach of sloping white sand. He lay on his side coughing as the water receded and watched a rosy dawn fingering the sky.

That was all on this occasion. He awoke, or rather he then returned to the normal twentieth-century world and the nightmare of his own position. Farlow had become aware of the difficulties of his "dream," from the very first moment he had, as he continued to say, pierced the curtain. For in his terror, as he fumbled to switch on the light and look at the clock, he found sand between his toes and his pyjamas were soaked with cold, salt water.

The reaction of Farlow to the bizarre and terrible situation in which he found himself may easily be imagined; certainly no one but Farlow himself could comprehend the shock to mind and system. It was months before he could bring himself to speak to me of this first "expedition beyond the veil," as he termed it. For two nights following this extraordinary awakening he did not dare to sleep. And on the third night his exhaustion was too great for dreaming.

For over a week his sleep was normal and then he had the second experience. He had retired soon after midnight and went straight from a sleeping to an "awake" state. Once again he was struggling in a shallow sea, once again he dragged himself painfully ashore, but this time the vision, call it what you will,

went on a little longer. Farlow lay on the beach, coughing out salt water and intermittently opening his eyes; he saw dawn creep slowly up that wild and beautiful shore and knew himself to be somewhere in the East. But it was not the East as known today, but at a time of great antiquity.

And then, as the sun came up through the mist, the scene changed like the opening of a door and Farlow awoke in his own bed, once again soaked to the skin with salt water. It was about that time that he consulted a doctor friend who was, of course, unable to help. Farlow somewhat naturally did not tell him the whole story, not wishing to be thought insane, and without the terrible awakenings, the matter seemed no more to the doctor than a dream which repeated itself, as sometimes happens to many people.

It was difficult for an outsider to conceive the torment of Farlow's mind at this time; it would have been bad enough for a normal person but Farlow was a scientist and his mind rejected such things automatically. It was against all the known laws of nature, and yet it was happening. The third dream was a repetition of the others but to Farlow's relief it began with him already lying on the beach. The sun was a little higher in the sky and the mist was beginning to disperse. Strangely, he retained his fear of drowning in the dream state, but he noticed vividly that he appeared to have recovered from the experience of being in the sea. With this so-called evidence and the heat of the sun on the beach, he estimated that he had been lying on the sand for about three hours.

Thus it appeared to him that the dreams were progressive in time and that if they continued, the incidents would overlap in the manner of a cinema film projected over and over again, with the difference that a little more of the action would be revealed

each time. It took him quite a long while to work this out, of course, for his waking self at first rejected the implications. In the fourth dream the sun was higher in the sky, the mist was thinning out a little, and when he awoke to his own room in the twentieth century he had been able to see that he was dressed in some sort of open-necked blouse made of linen of an antique cut.

The lower half of his body was clad in baggy pantaloons of some dark material of a type quite beyond his experience, and as he had noticed on the first occasion, his feet were bare. The most extraordinary thing about this fourth dream was that though he had awakened on the three previous occasions drenched in what appeared to be sea-water, he woke this last time with his skin barely damp. Farlow then argued that his experience in the dream state had a physical or rational basis, and from this he deduced that the sun beating on his other self was drying him out.

At this stage he was still trying to rationalize his terrors and one thing which greatly exercised his mind was the minor curiosity of how the physical situation of his dream self could be carried over into real life in one case and not the other. He was referring, naturally, to the water on his skin which was physically evident on awakening and the fact that he was still dressed in his pyjamas. If the same rules applied in transferring one substance from the dream to another dimension, then in theory he should have still been dressed in the shirt and trousers. At least so he argued.

His analytical powers were beginning to be affected at this stage, and there was the additional problem of what happened to his pyjamas while "he" was on the beach. Or were there two selves existing in different planes? But however he argued it, Farlow met with a breakdown of all logical rules, whenever he applied them to one set of circumstances or the other—the dream-

world or the real. The line between the two was becoming very blurred.

This sort of thing had been going on for several months when Farlow began to take me into his confidence. He was always a thin, finely strung sort of man and his experiences of the past weeks had put deep shadows under his eyes and his physical frame looked frailer than at any time I remembered. It took several evenings of half-coherent, hedging talk before he really broached the subject, but once he had got fairly started his thoughts came tumbling out like water released from a floodgate.

His greatest fear was that I should suppose his sanity to be in question, but after I had listened to him for several evenings and questioned him keenly about certain points, I was able to reassure him on this. If ever a man was sane in the true sense of the word, it was Farlow. He had told me about the first half dozen or so dreams, which had taken him to a point higher up the beach. It was warm and comfortable there, in the hot sand, and as the dreams or visions or whatever you like to call them, now began with him already ashore and dry, there were no unpleasant physical effects on awakening, for which he was thankful.

So far as he could make out, for he did not always check by the clock, the duration of each dream was firmly stamped in his mind as being about three hours, but the actual time in this world amounted to ten minutes. He saw no particular significance in this, but he made the curious remark that if the dream had commenced with him far at sea, and several miles from land, and he could not have swum to shore in the three hours allowed, he would have drowned. I did not see how he could possibly argue that and I felt it was time to turn his thoughts away from such morbid directions. But though I spoke warmly and, as I thought, sensibly on the point, he brushed my valid objections aside with a

sigh. He just felt convinced that it would be so, he said, and nothing I could say would turn him aside from this.

I asked him then if he thought that there would have been a drowned corpse in the bed when he came back to this world, and he answered quite simply in the affirmative. This impelled me to question him further; it was implicit in his argument that his physical self was absent from his bed during the course of the dreams, and I offered to keep watch in his room if that would help. This he would not have at any price; he gave no reason, but looked at me curiously and it was my own personal view that he feared that any intervention by another person, however well meant, might endanger him and prevent him from "getting back."

I did not press the matter, for I saw how serious the situation had become. The next evening I visited Farlow he seemed calmer and more rational. He had had a quiet night and he proceeded to bring me up to date on his reasoning. The dreams now began with him lying, fully conscious, far up the beach, well rested and quite dry in the heat of the sun. The sand stretched for mile after mile and he seemed to know in his heart that he was in the East and in an ancient time. The mist was clearing as the sun rose, the waves moved languidly in the sunlight, and far off to the east the spires of some city at the edge of the shore were revealing themselves.

All through his series of visions Farlow, even in his dream state, had no notion of who he was, how he had come to be in the sea, or what he was doing on the shore. He was invariably attired in the blouse and dark pantaloons, and always woke with a dry skin and dressed in pyjamas. The fear of the dream had not yet begun, and so far as he could estimate the pattern of three hours dream and ten minutes real time continued.

The dreams averaged about one a week—though there were occasions when there were two—and were always progressive. They usually occurred when Farlow was more than ordinarily tired, which gave him the notion that the barriers of everyday were broken down at those times. His doctor friend had been unable to help. It was in these circumstances that he resolved to bring something back with him from the dream-world of the shore, if it were physically possible. I was sitting in Farlow's study after dinner late one evening when he told me this. I could see that it had cost him a great effort to speak of it.

“And were you successful?” I asked, forcing the words out.

Farlow's eyes were dark caverns of sombre knowledge as he nodded slowly. Abruptly he got up and went over to his desk. He unlocked one of the drawers, drew out something wrapped in white cloth, and put it down on the table in front of me.

“Have a look at this,” he said. “You need not be alarmed. It isn't anything unpleasant.”

I must confess my hand was a little unsteady as I unwrapped the cloth. Perhaps I was disappointed or it may have been a curious look on my face, but Farlow relaxed and smiled grimly. What I had before me was a piece of reddish-coloured rock, about six inches long and three wide, weighing perhaps a couple of pounds. I looked at it stupefied.

“You don't mean to say that you actually brought this back from your dream?” I said. Nothing could have been more banal than my sentence but I was even more surprised when Farlow agreed.

“Yes,” he said simply. “That is exactly what I do mean.”

I couldn't think of anything to say that was neither idiotic nor a reflection on Farlow's sanity, so I turned the piece of rock over in my hand and added, “Have you had someone look at this?”

Farlow nodded again. "Smithers. One of the best geologists we've got. He was quite excited. He was damned puzzled too. He places it at the time of Christ. What upset him was the fact that there had been no weathering since."

Farlow and I exchanged a long glance. Then I held up my whisky glass for the stiff peg he started to pour me. There was nothing to say.

I was unavoidably called away on business soon after Farlow's incredible revelation and though I kept in touch by letter, it was more than three weeks before I saw him again. Brief as the interval had been there was an indefinable difference in his face; a subtle fear lurking at the back of his eyes which I did not like. It took a day or two to regain the old intimacy and it was not until several nights later that he started to bring me up to date. There had been more dreams, of course; that much he had already hinted on my return.

They had been progressive, I knew, though he had not gone into detail, but now they had taken a more sinister turn. He had been sitting halfway up the beach, fully recovered from his ordeal in the sea. His memory in the dream recalled this fact, but nothing beyond it. He still did not know his identity or the location of the shore. It was lighter now and the mist was almost gone. The turrets and spires of the distant city winked and shimmered through the grey wisps of morning haze and he felt a lightening of the heart.

Over several sittings Farlow took me through a whole series of dreams, in which the pattern gradually became darker until eventually horror tinged the atmosphere. How he first heard, Farlow did not remember, but over a period which lasted about ten days, he absorbed the fact that the city was called Emilion. He

was dreaming almost every night now and each time the dream began with him sitting on the beach, with the sky brighter, the mists thinning away, the fair face of the city more clearly revealed.

The brightness and beauty of Emilion was something beyond this world, said Farlow; it gladdened the heart and filled his whole being with joy. And as he daily gained in strength in the dream, he started to run on the beach and splash in and out of the warm water, as he gazed at the distant city, which rose spire on golden spire out of a sea of rosy mist.

The only thing to compare with it in this world, said Farlow, was Mont St. Michel on a bright spring morning with the sun gilding the tops of the wavelets; but lovely as that was by earthly standards, it was a poor thing compared with the unearthly beauty of the dream.

“Multiply Mont St. Michel a hundredfold and there you have Emilion,” Farlow told me simply, the firelight coming and going on his dark, tired face.

Even during the daytime waking hours, the name of Emilion had filled his soul with quiet contentment and he had spent much of his spare time brooding over old maps and atlases, particularly those of mediaeval times, but without success. Emilion as a city seemed to belong to the land of make-believe. Then one night, about a week before my return, the dream had begun to change. The banners and turrets and spires of Emilion were seen across a vast stretch of foaming strand, more than a mile wide, which was stained all pink and gold with the light of the rising sun, as the shallow waves broke across it. There was a woman in the city, whom Farlow loved, I gathered.

He himself was only vaguely aware of this, but gradually through the whole astonishing series of dreams, the fact had

permeated his heart. He did not know her name; only that he loved; that the girl was there; and that to Emilion he must find his way. And yet, as is the way with dreams, even of the vivid kind which Farlow was experiencing, the thing could not be rushed. He could not simply proceed to the city as one would in normal life. In timeless, slow-motion sequences, the dream proceeded from night to night. Each time Farlow would be but a few feet nearer the edge of the vast foaming foreshore which separated him from the city. And then one night there came a subtle change in the picture.

For as he gazed across at the turrets of Emilion, he became aware of a faint white swathe, like a hazy touch of gauze along the base of the picture. It swirled across the sand, beneath the city walls, more than a mile and a half away. It was stationary, yet seemed to move with incredible speed and Farlow was conscious of a faint unease. A breath of cold wind seemed to disperse the last folds of mist still hanging over the surface of the sea, and a strange fear gnawed at his heart. He stopped walking towards the city and gazed at the faint patch of white that blurred the far distance. And then he awoke to nameless dread and an icy dew on his forehead.

He feared sleep the following night but it overtook him just the same; he was on the shore looking across the far strand and there, in the distance, was the strange misty cloud that moved with such tremendous speed. And it seemed to him that it had come a little nearer. The cold wind blew on Farlow and he felt the deep-rooted fear there is no allaying. And once again he awoke. Several times more he dreamed and each time it was the same; every night the city of Emilion shone across the foaming water but the patch of white had spread and begun to reveal itself in detail.

And the wind blew with a cold breath and it seemed to Farlow that it made a whispering murmur in the sky. And what it said

with such insidious clamour in his ear was: "THE JANISSARIES OF EMILION!" And Farlow woke with a shrieking cry.

"What do you make of it?" Farlow asked me for the fourth time.

I lit a cigarette with a hand which was none too steady.

"The Janissaries were a sort of mameluke, weren't they?" I said at last.

Farlow nodded. He reached down a thick tome from one of his shelves.

"I wasted no time in looking them up," he said. He read from the reference work in front of him. According to this the Janissaries were a body of Turkish infantry in olden times, forming the personal bodyguard of the Sultan of Turkey. They had been abolished in 1826. The reference book also gave them as: Personal instrument of tyranny. Turkish soldier.

I tried to look wiser than I felt as Farlow finished reading.

"How does this tie in with the period being two thousand years ago? Or the East?" I asked quickly, before Farlow could speak.

"The Janissaries were a terribly ancient force which existed under many names," Farlow replied quietly. "They were mounted at an earlier period. And they operated outside Turkey. In the East particularly. And you must remember that Turkey was an Oriental Empire. It was only since Ataturk. . . ."

"Very well," I interrupted him. "You surely can't take this latest phase seriously."

Farlow held up his hand to stop me from saying anything further. One look at his face was enough for me to see that he was deadly serious.

"You have not heard me out," he said patiently. "There have been more dreams since those of which I have just told you."

Put briefly, Farlow's dream self had stood upon the shore and as the vision progressed from day to day had seen the white cloud grow, until it had blossomed into something which resembled a dark mass of many points, topped with a hazy, billowing mist. On the last occasion on which he had dreamed, he had seen little spurts of foam as the mass entered the surf on the far side of the gulf which separated it from him. And the great fear which had paralyzed him seemed to fix on his heart like a stone and the freezing wind which followed had again whispered: "THE JANISSARIES OF EMILION!"

And like a man who escapes from a nightmare to find himself still within it, the wretched Farlow had screamed awake to find his day but the prelude to the fears of the following night. I tried to comfort my friend as best I could, though it was scant encouragement my presence was able to give. I was of the opinion that a priest or psychiatrist might do more good; but who could accompany him within this dark dream and stand at his side in strong support against the nightmare which menaced him? It was an insidious, sombre battle being waged nightly within the man's mind and I feared the end as I heard his next words.

He sat quietly at the table and said to me in even tones, "I have thought it out carefully. In the last dream, only two nights ago, I was able to distinguish clearly for the first time the nature of the threat. I shall never reach the city. Crossing the water to reach me are a body of horsemen, clad in white robes, moving at a tremendous speed. Even at the slow rate at which the dream progresses the end cannot be long delayed. A few weeks at most."

I sought to reassure him with some platitude but the words died in my throat.

“They are the Janissaries of Emilion!” Farlow called out in a strangled voice. “I can begin to distinguish the cruel Oriental faces. I have become a man on whom they had revenge in the ancient times.”

“But what can a dream do to harm you?” I burst out impatiently, in spite of myself.

“Fool!” Farlow almost shrieked. “They will kill me! When they catch me I shall die.”

I was silent before this outburst. Farlow had turned away and stood looking unseeingly at the bookcase.

I reached for my hat. “In my opinion, you need good medical advice, my friend, and at once,” I said. “If I might recommend. . . .”

“Good-evening,” said Farlow in dead, measured tones.

I went out and quietly closed the door behind me. That night even I doubted Farlow’s sanity.

In this extreme crisis, and with Farlow’s sanity and even life at stake, I sought out Dr. Sondquist. In as subtle a manner as I could I laid something of the case before him. To my relief Dr. Sondquist treated the matter as being within the normal bounds of psychiatric practice. He had an impressive-sounding line of Jungian and Adlerian quotations, and his crisp, incisive manner convinced me that here was a man who could recall Farlow from the dark shoreline to which his mind had wandered, if anyone could.

To my relief, my next interview with Farlow passed off much better than I had expected. My friend seemed to have forgotten his outburst of the previous day. Though he was pale and

distraught, he had lost something of the terrible atmosphere of nerves at cracking point which had previously surrounded him. We spoke quietly and calmly. I gathered that his sleep had been dreamless for once. The upshot of our conversation was that Farlow agreed to go and see Dr. Sondquist. A week later, after much careful heart-searching, he entered Greenmansion for the rest and observation to which I have already referred.

I thus necessarily lost something of the close contact which we had formerly enjoyed, though I was able to visit Farlow twice a week in the earlier stages and Dr. Sondquist kept me fully informed of his patient's progress. The end of the story I had to piece together for myself from Farlow's own conversation, from a diary he left which the Superintendent allowed me to examine, and from my last terrible conversation with Sondquist.

When I first saw Farlow after his entry into Greenmansion I was disturbed to note that he appeared even more fine-drawn and gaunt than before. But the white-painted walls of the sanatorium and the air of quiet efficiency and bustle which radiated from the nursing and medical staff had had a beneficial effect, I should have said.

Without preamble he plunged at once into the details of his latest visions, as though they were more than he could bear to contemplate alone, which was, after all, no more than the truth. He had dreamed twice more, he said; it was the same and yet not the same. The Janissaries, for so he had identified them, were much nearer. He was still rooted to the shore, but the white-cloaked riders were now splashing through the shallows about halfway across the foaming stretch of water which barred his way to the city of Emilion.

He could see that they carried some sort of banner which bore the green crescent, and the short, heavy-bladed swords they

waved, glinted in the bright sunshine of mid-morning. Their turbanned heads bobbed rhythmically as they rode and their black horses, bunched closely together, clove the white, frothing water with their steel-shod hooves. But what gave Farlow such a terrible sense of impending doom was the cruelty of the faces beneath the turbans of the Janissaries of Emilion. Their bearded jaws, the narrow, blazing eyes, and the red, thin lips which parted to reveal the shining, sharp-pointed white teeth looked so rapacious and sadistic that his dream self was near to fainting with fear.

In the last dream of the previous night they were so close that he could hear the guttural cries they uttered and see the details of the elaborate bits on the bridles of the horses. The riders wore boots of soft leather, and the metal spurs they used dug deeply into the flanks of the plunging horses. And again the cold wind swept across the blue sky, bringing with it the great chilling despair, and for the twentieth or thirtieth time Farlow awoke to nightmare.

I gave my unfortunate friend what comfort I could and took my leave. Unfortunately, Sondquist was away that day so I could not have the conversation with him which might have made some difference to the outcome of the business, though I was rapidly coming to the same conclusion that had plunged Farlow into such profound melancholy; namely, that the outcome of the dream could not be halted, but what that outcome was, none of us, least of all Farlow, fortunately, could have foreseen.

My next information came from the diary Farlow had kept over the last few months. The extract which I have summarized is from the period immediately following my last visit. Farlow was by this time having shock treatment of a particularly violent type, and his days had thus begun to assume the same detached, un-

worldly aspect as that of his nights. Sondquist was worried about him, beneath the urbane professional surface, and the object of the special treatment was to break up the dream patterns and so disperse them. At least, this is how the diary of Farlow read to the mind of a layman. There was much abstruse speculation of a suprametaphysical type, which was a bit too heavy going for me, and I skipped those pages in which Farlow gave himself up to such musings on the physical laws of nature and of the construction of the universe.

But the effect of the treatment had been merely to delay the progress of the dreams; so that where Farlow had, for example, been experiencing three sequences of the dream state in a week, he now had one. So the object realized had been only that of a slowing-up process; the treatment had no power to disrupt, destroy, or dispel the pattern which had assumed a cloud of such alarming proportion on Farlow's mental horizon.

He spent such part of his day not occupied in treatment, lying on the small iron bed, fully clothed, looking up at the ceiling and listening to the soothing noises of the birds from the garden beyond. He lay listening to the roaring of the blood in his ears; he could hear the fluids of his body bubbling beneath the surface of his skin. He was enormously conscious of being alive; he could almost feel his toenails growing underneath his socks. And with this tremendous feeling, this consciousness of the vital force within himself, Farlow, at forty-nine, realized that he had much to live for, much yet to give the world in the way of knowledge and research; with this realization came a tremendous effort to shake off the dark sense of doom which now not only filled the horizon of his dream but the entire horizon of his waking life.

One of his last entries in the diary said with tragic foreknowledge, "Those faces, those ghastly, cruel faces! And

those eyes! If Sondquist is not successful, they will reach me soon. And that will be the end. . . .”

The end came sooner than expected. To me it was a profound shock. I had been unable to visit Farlow for nearly a week. When I telephoned Greenmansion to inquire about my friend, the matron had been evasive and had put me on to the doctor in charge. He in turn had not been helpful and had referred me to Sondquist. But as Sondquist himself was too busy to come to the phone it did not get me much farther forward. I was not at all satisfied and decided to visit the sanatorium in person.

It was a day of early summer in which the shimmering haze, the contented songs of birds, and the heavy warmth which rose from the ground, spoke of even greater heat to come. As I drove out to Greenmansion, the beauty of the afternoon made a vivid contrast in my mind to the dark situation in which the unfortunate Farlow found himself. As soon as I arrived I saw that there was something wrong. The main gates of the sanatorium were shut and locked and I had to ring at the porter's lodge.

He in turn had to phone the main building to get permission for me to proceed. While he was doing this I left my car and quietly opened the small gate at the side of the lodge, which was unlocked. As I slipped past I heard the porter's cry of protest, but he was too late. I was in the grounds and rapidly walking towards the house. As soon as I came up to the front steps I could see by the unusual activity that I was too late to help my friend. An ambulance from the State Department concerned was parked against the side of the lawn and next to it two big blue police cars with State license plates. I was met by a white-faced matron who tried to dissuade me from seeing Dr. Sondquist.

“Ring the Superintendent tonight, please,” she said. “It will be best.”

I shook my head. "I wish to see Dr. Sondquist at once," I said firmly. She hesitated and then reluctantly went into her office. I had waited in the hall for nearly ten minutes before the measured tread of the doctor sounded along the corridor. He looked harassed and worn.

"I wish to see Farlow," I said without further preamble. Sondquist shook his head and a curious look came and went in his eyes.

"I have bad news for you, I am afraid," he said. "Farlow died last night."

The information took some moments to sink in and I then became aware that Sondquist had led me to a chair; the matron hovered in the background. The Superintendent handed me a glass of brandy and I mechanically swallowed it.

"What happened?" I stammered, as soon as I had recovered my senses somewhat.

Again the curious look passed over Sondquist's face. "He had a heart attack in the night," he said. "There was nothing we could do."

I just did not believe him and my disbelief must have shown in my next words.

"Then why are the police here?" I asked in stumbling tones.

Sondquist shook his head impatiently. "That is about another matter altogether," he said hurriedly. Spots of red stood out high on his cheekbones. He put his hand on my shoulder in a kindly manner.

"I have much to do at the moment. Why not ring me this evening and we will arrange an appointment for tomorrow, when I have more time. Then I will answer all your questions."

I agreed dully and a few minutes later drove back to town. But the interview with the doctor next day did not seem at all satisfactory to me and there were many of my questions left

unanswered. The funeral took place quietly and the weeks passed by and poor Farlow and his problems seemed forgotten by the world at large. But I had not forgotten. I kept up my acquaintance with Sondquist and after many visits, when he had come to trust me and had seen that there was more than morbid curiosity in my questioning, he satisfied my queries. Sometimes I wish he hadn't. For then I should sleep better at nights.

It was more than a year afterwards before he could bring himself to confide in me. It was almost September and a thin fire of twigs crackled in his study at Greenmansion, for though the days continued in blazing heat, there was an underlying chill in the evenings. He had got out some of the record books on Farlow's treatment and had allowed me to look at the patient's own diary.

After we had been talking for some time, I asked him, "Do you think Farlow was mad?"

Sondquist hesitated and then shook his head emphatically. "I sometimes feel that I may be," he said enigmatically and a look of strain showed in his eyes.

"What does that mean?" I asked.

The doctor drummed nervously with his long thin fingers on the desk, then picked up his glass of wine and drained it.

"Would you really like to know how Farlow died?" he said. I nodded. The doctor turned and stared sombrely into the fire, as though the answer to the problem of Farlow lay somewhere amid the flickering flames.

"I can rely on your complete discretion in this matter?" he said after a long silence.

"Absolutely," I said.

Sondquist turned to face me and looked me straight in the eyes as he told me the end of the story.

"You are completely aware of all the progressive stages of Farlow's dreams or visions, I take it?" he asked.

"He gave me his confidence," I said.

Sondquist told me that Farlow had been quiet and cooperative, as he always was, during the last day or two of his treatment. But on the afternoon before his death he had become more than usually agitated and in a long interview with Dr. Sondquist had gone deeply into his fears. The import of his story was that the Janissaries of Emilion were so close to him in his last dream that he could almost touch them. If he slept that night he felt they would destroy him somehow, that he would die.

Sondquist, who had, of course, a different interpretation of the dream, held that the final vision would have been the catalyst; that it held the kernel of the problem. He told Farlow that in the crisis of his last dream he would finally overcome his fear and be able to live a normal life. After that night, if it came, he said, Farlow would be cured. My friend's reaction to this was the expected. He became violent, said that Sondquist had no notion of the real problem, and that the Superintendent's life was not at stake. In the end he became so agitated that he had to be physically restrained by the attendants. He shrieked a good deal about the Janissaries of Emilion and begged Sondquist to have a guard placed over him that night.

The Superintendent put him under sedatives and the night staff were instructed to look at him from time to time during the dark hours. Farlow had been taken to a padded room, though a strait-jacket had not been thought necessary, and he was sleeping normally in his bed, when one of the male nurses last looked in through the peephole at about 2:00 A.M.

The sanatorium was roused by the most appalling screams around four in the morning. The uproar had come from Farlow's

room, and it was like nothing else in the Superintendent's experience. The first male nurse to look through the peephole in Farlow's door had a violent fit of vomiting and the matron fainted. It was with some difficulty that Sondquist was able to take charge; after a careful examination of the contents of the room the police were sent for, photographs were taken, and the subsequent investigation, undertaken at County level, had lasted more than a week.

For the sake of public opinion as well as that of Greenmansion and the reputation of Dr. Sondquist, the highest authorities, among them the County Coroner, had agreed that no public examination of the matter should take place and the affair was hushed over. The truth was so fantastic that the only written record of it remained in the private files of Dr. Sondquist and these were kept perpetually locked in a private safe-deposit, to be opened only on his death.

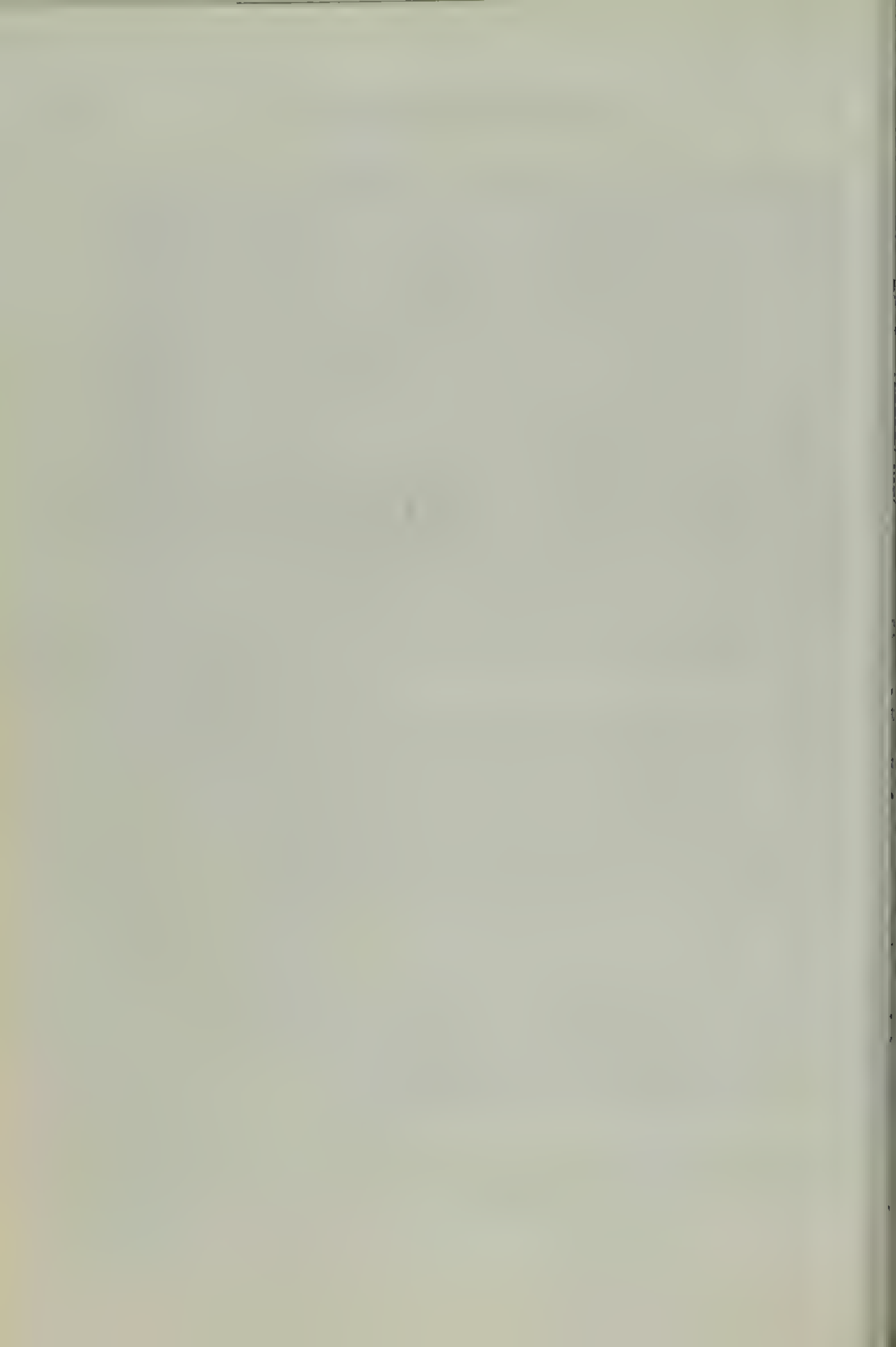
It was at this point that I put my final questions, Dr. Sondquist made his answers and permitted me to see some photographs which I felt would have been better destroyed. I can never forget what they depicted. Sick at heart, I at length took my leave and drove like a drunken man back to my house. When I had recovered my senses somewhat, I wrapped the piece of rock Farlow had given me in a piece of sacking, and weighted it with stones secured by wire.

Then I drove out to the Point and hurled it into the deepest part of the sea. That done, some of the shadow seemed lifted from my mind. But the thing haunts my brain and latterly my sleep too has become more and more broken. Pray God that I do not dream the same dream as Farlow.

What Sondquist had told me and what the photographs depicted had been like something from an obscene

slaughterhouse. For in Farlow's room, which was padded and contained no sharp edges of any kind, much less a weapon, the gutted, disembowelled, and eviscerated monstrosity which had once been my friend was spread about in carmine horror; there an eyeball, here a leg or an arm like some demoniac scene in a canvas by Bosch. Save that this was gory reality. No wonder the staff had fainted or that the ambulance attendants had used masks and tongs when clearing up.

Said Sondquist in a trembling voice as I took my leave, "Make no mistake about it, though the thing is scientifically impossible, Farlow had been hacked to pieces as surely as if a dozen men had attacked him with sharpened swords or knives!"





Archives of the Dead





Robert Trumble arrived at Linnet Ridge as a thin, persistent rain was beginning to fall. The house was in a remote part of Surrey and the sombre drive up through avenues of pines and fir had not prepared him for the sight of the building itself; painted white, standing foursquare to the bracing winds of the uplands, it did not seem to Trumble to typify the reputation of Dr. Ramon Fabri as one of the foremost authorities on the occult.

And yet why should it? Trumble smiled wryly to himself. Surprising how one's mind still moved on conventional lines in some respects. He still found it difficult to conceal his bitterness at some facets of the world as he found it; a minor poet of some brilliance, he had somehow failed to live up to his early promise. As is the way with poets, the public had omitted to buy his works in any great numbers, the editions had passed out of print, and Trumble had been reduced to tutoring and hack work over the past years in order to make a living.

This was why Dr. Fabri's Personal advertisement in *The Times* had seemed so attractive; a secretaryship, though not really the sort of thing to which a minor poet aspired, would at least see him financially stable until he should set forth again on

some other literary adventure. From what he had gathered at a London interview with Dr. Fabri his duties would not be too onerous; furthermore, the salary was generous in proportion to Trumble's slender secretarial experience; he would live in and live well, judging by Dr. Fabri's reputation as a gourmet; and the post would leave him time for his literary endeavours. He had closed at once and, three days later, had driven down in his old, second-hand two-seater.

As always, the hood had leaked all the way, though the rain had held off its main attack until he was past Reigate; from then on its steady encroachment had made driving a misery and Trumble saw with relief the lodge gates of his destination compose themselves before the thin beams of his headlights in the filmy April dusk.

His tyres crunched over gravel as he drove up a well-kept drive between smooth lawns and on to the impressive Georgian façade of Dr. Fabri's residence. He carried up his two shabby suitcases between the gleaming white splendour of the pillared entrance porch and saw light shining through the circular windows that flanked the pale yellow front door. Before he could set down his cases to ring the bell, a tall, lean figure blocked out the light that spilled from the open entry.

The man was some sort of general handyman, Trumble judged by his striped waistcoat and the green baize apron he wore round his waist like a domestic servant in a faded prewar comedy. The man had razor-sharp features with yellow skin stretched over a sharply etched skull; his bald head echoed his face in the lamp-light as he stooped to pick up Trumble's bags.

"Dr. Fabri's waiting in the study, sir," he said in correct, clipped tones. "He says he would like you to go straight through."

Trumble murmured some commonplace and then turned towards his car; he found the bald man at his elbow. A hand closed over his arm and he was held softly but immovably. The pressure lasted only a moment but the fellow must have had immense strength.

"Dr. Fabri said at once, sir," he said with slight emphasis on the last words. "I'll attend to your car if you'll give me the keys."

Trumble looked at the man's impassive features and handed them over. The grip on his arm was instantly relaxed. The man in the striped waistcoat slid swiftly behind the wheel of Trumble's old machine.

"Straight down the hall, sir, first door on the right," he called, his flat, clipped voice without echoes in the dusk and the thin, whispering rain. "I'll bring your baggage after."

Trumble went through the porch and into the hall, leaving his bags where they were, as the car trundled away round the drive towards some unseen destination in the rear. Rather an odd character for chauffeur-butler, he felt, though no doubt Dr. Fabri might have use of such a person living in the lonely spot he had chosen to make his home.

It was none of his business; and in any case the fellow had been polite enough. It was just his attitude; withdrawn strength and confidence, just this side of insolence, which rankled somewhere inside Trumble's mind. He felt he must be getting hypersensitive; rejection by the larger literary world of which he had once had such inordinate hopes might be the reason behind it. He closed the door softly behind him and blinked in the bright light of the inner hall.

He walked in over a tiled floor of extraordinary beauty. Light reflected back the smooth greens, reds, and blues of the con-

volute designs; Trumble recognized the pentacle and something which looked like the seal of Cagliostro. Dr. Fabri, as he knew, was deeply read in literature which dwelt on dark and hidden things, and Trumble himself was intensely interested in the subject; indeed, one of his earlier volumes of poetry, *On Goety*, had been based on the Seven Seals, which may well have originally drawn his name to Dr. Fabri's attention.

Trumble flushed at the thought; like all failed and deeply sensitive men he was alive to every nuance and subtlety which might indicate that the wider world had not entirely overlooked his work and the notion that Dr. Fabri might actually have read and appreciated his poems gave his starved mind more pleasure than he cared to admit.

He was charmed, too, to see that his future employer carried his interests to the length of including them in the decor of his house; the post promised to be one of unexpected delights. He passed several oil paintings on his way to the door of which the servant had spoken; they were undoubtedly genuine works of art, of obvious value and chosen with unfailing taste to illustrate Dr. Fabri's chosen pursuits. Trumble was astonished to notice a magnificent Bosch which he did not think had existed outside a museum in Amsterdam; though, like all of Bosch's work it had a haunting and vivid quality that one with tender nerves would find disquieting, to say the least.

Even Trumble was not sure that he cared all that much for the subject; screaming forms which fled through what appeared to be looped sections of viscera. Really, Bosch had a stunning genius, Trumble felt; he was almost a painter of the twenty-first century and the modern world still had not caught up with his terrifying fancies and extraordinary sense of colour and design. But Trumble did not have time for more than an admiring glance at

the canvas; in a moment more he was at the door and, knocking on it, heard Dr. Fabri call out for him to enter.

Fabri was a man in his middle forties with a powerful frame and a tanned complexion; despite his comparative youth his hair was completely white but cut very short like a young man. His deep-set eyes were brilliant and penetrating and his square tortoiseshell spectacles gave his face a quizzical look and reinforced its strength. His jaw was square also and the glasses echoed the cubistic theme. He rose from a red-leather-topped desk to greet Trumble with obvious pleasure.

“I trust you had a good journey?”

His voice was dark-toned and deep and its timbre recalled to the new secretary that Dr. Fabri had been famous for his lecture-tours on the Continent a dozen or so years before; a celebrated series that at one time threatened to launch him into the dubious career of a television celebrity. Fortunately, Dr. Fabri had the good taste to draw back and his scholarship and erudition were henceforth confined to those comparatively small numbers of people who bought tickets of entry to the halls of learned institutions in London, Paris, Rome, Berlin, and other leading capitals. Trumble had, of course, spent almost an hour in Dr. Fabri's company at his previous interview but he was now seeing the doctor in his own surroundings for the first time and he studied his employer's milieu with more than casual interest.

As the two men exchanged a few remarks, Trumble's eyes wandered about the vast study in which they sat; it was one of the most curious places he had ever seen. There was a large globe covered with zodiac signs whose use was obscure to him; tapestries decorated with cabalistic insignia writhed over the far wall while the massed shelves contained thousands of volumes of works in Greek and Latin. So far as he could make out, many of

the books were rare and valuable originals. Trumble felt his spirits reviving.

At the far end of the chamber was a large platform enclosed by iron railings; a spiral staircase ascended to it from the main floor of the library. Trumble could see chemical retorts and a Bunsen-burner on one of the benches gave off a bluish-green flame in the dusk. Blue velvet curtains partitioned off part of the other end of the room and the shadowy forms of images of ancient gods ranged round those parts of the walls not given over to books.

"I see that you approve of my surroundings," said Dr. Fabri, shooting him a shrewd glance. "My collection is not so comprehensive as I should wish, but I have begun to make a start. Life is not long enough for the amassing of knowledge, my friend."

Fabri laughed as Trumble stammered out some rejoinder. But then his host rose abruptly.

"Forgive me, but I am forgetting my manners. You must be hungry. Joseph will have a meal prepared shortly."

He led the way out of the study and into an adjoining apartment, conventionally furnished as a dining-room but with panelled walls of some charm and with great glazed doors looking onto the ruin of a once considerable garden. Fabri pulled the curtains over the sombre scene outside the window and led the way over to a cabinet; whisky splashed into long crystal glasses and there came the friendly tinkle of ice. A moment later Dr. Fabri handed him the glass and they toasted one another silently by a fire of logs which spluttered contentedly to itself in a handsome stone fireplace. Trumble sank into a high-backed chair and gazed into the fire as his host excused himself; he felt that he would enjoy his stay at Linnet Ridge.

He was aroused from his thoughts by a sound at his elbow and saw the man Joseph, who had met him in the porch, busying

himself at the long teak dining-table. He laid two places silently and with polished efficiency and went out through the far door. Dr. Fabri returned almost at once.

"Excuse my bad manners, my dear Trumble," he said, pressing a thin book into his new secretary's hands, "but I could not resist the opportunity. I am something of a collector, as you know, and your name was not unknown to me before we met. It would give me great pleasure if you would inscribe the work for me."

Trumble saw with surprise that the book was a rare edition of his own *On Goety*, produced on hand-woven paper in a limited edition from a private press in Paris. So far as he knew there had been only two hundred copies produced. He felt his hands tremble as he took a pen from his pocket and composed something appropriate on the flyleaf for Dr. Fabri.

"You were surprised, eh?" said the doctor, as he examined Trumble's inscription and thanked him for it.

"There are so few copies and my work is so obscure," said Trumble, his voice quivering slightly. "One works so hard and yet it is so difficult to become known."

Dr. Fabri gazed at him in sympathy. "One is known to those who are of importance and that is what counts," he said simply. "It is a great honour to have you under my roof. But now let us eat. Tomorrow it will give me pleasure to show you round my house. You will not find your duties onerous and I am sure we shall find many mutual interests to share."

He led the way to the table. The meal passed in silence, the courses served impeccably by the man Joseph. There did not appear to be any other staff. Dr. Fabri made no mention of Trumble's duties and for his part the poet was content for the moment to enjoy the good food and wine with which his new

employer plied him. Shortly after half-past nine Dr. Fabri excused himself. "Joseph will show you your quarters," he said. "Until tomorrow, then."

The big man led the way up a large oak staircase that opened from the hall and along a luxuriously carpeted corridor lined with oak doors. He flung open the third and switched on the light.

"If you require anything, sir, you have only to ring," he said, indicating a brass push-button set into the wall next to a battery of light switches.

Trumble thanked him and closed the door behind him. It was a large, comfortable room to which he had been assigned; centrally heated, it was furnished with plain modern furniture and well lit from both ceiling and wall light fixtures. There were three doors opening off it; investigating, Trumble found a sitting-room, bathroom, and toilet. He came back to the bedroom with considerable pleasure: it might pay him to stay with Dr. Fabri for an indefinite period.

His two shabby suitcases were standing in the centre of the room where Joseph had left them; his car keys were on the dressing-table. He smiled to himself; evidently Joseph was as efficient as his master. He unpacked quickly, stowed away his few belongings in the drawers, and put the empty suitcases in the wardrobe. He felt unaccountably tired, but put this down to the long and unpleasant drive. He came back from the bathroom in pyjamas and prepared for bed; the thin cry of an owl came from a thicket somewhere beyond the garden but apart from that there was no sound but the faint gurgling of water in the pipes of the central heating system.

He went idly to the window and looked down into the garden, now silvered by a moon which shone from a clear rainless sky. It was then that he saw the window was covered with bars which

followed the pattern of the leaded panes. He frowned. He went back over towards the door. It was, as he had somehow expected, locked. It was curious but it proved nothing, except possibly that to Dr. Fabri he was an unknown quantity; a new employee loose in a household which contained many valuable paintings and objets d'art. He smiled to himself; he did not feel at all insulted. He stood irresolute for a moment, gazing at the door-lock and from there to the brass bell-push which would bring the servant Joseph to him within seconds.

Then he shrugged and turned away. He might take up the matter tomorrow, when he had thought it over further. He got into bed, his mind already embracing sleep, and switched off the light. He slept well, awakening only once as the high, sharp, piercing cry of the owl was repeated; the sound was nearer, almost in the garden. It sounded twice more. He got up then and looked into the grounds but could see nothing. He went to the door before returning to the warmth of his bed; he tried the handle gently in the gloom. It was unlocked. He got back into bed. He was soon asleep and this time slept dreamlessly and uninterruptedly until breakfast time.

He ate his meal alone in a small, pleasant room that opened onto the lawn, with Joseph as the sole attendant to his needs. He was astonished to find that the garden, which had appeared such a ruin from his window the previous night was, at closer acquaintance, obviously well tended, with smooth lawns, well-kept beds, and rose bushes lining trellised pathways. He was annoyed with himself for having made such a stupid error, and after breakfast walked over to the French doors for a closer inspection but was unable to open the fastenings in order to gain access to the terrace.

Just then Dr. Fabri entered with smiling apologies for his nonappearance at breakfast.

"I have much to do, you know," he said jovially. He enquired politely how Trumble had slept; the latter had decided to say nothing about the locked bedroom door and privately meant to see whether it was his employer's intention to keep him segregated from the main house during the nights. In the meantime there was much to engage his attention; while Joseph cleared the table Dr. Fabri and his new employee took a turn round the vast garden, which confirmed Trumble's estimate through the window. He resolved to have a look at his bedroom casement that evening; there might be some distorting quality in the glass.

The two men returned to the house half an hour later, chatting in a desultory way of Trumble's duties; he gathered that he would be expected to keep Dr. Fabri's appointments diary, work out his day for him, answer the telephone, and do the indexing on the doctor's vast collection of books and documents. Apparently there were a great many more papers apart from the main library and it would take him a month or two to find his way around.

Trumble learned, with some pleasure, that he would have most afternoons free but, in return, was expected to put in an hour or two in the evenings, as Dr. Fabri might require from time to time; he would also have to take some dictation and he was glad that he had once learned shorthand in the days when he was contributing to magazines; the facility would obviously come in useful.

At this point in their conversation the two men had returned to the vast study, where the doctor was engaged in pointing out various aspects of his indexing system in the large green filing cabinets which lined one corner of the room.

“There is one other part of the house which will be your special domain,” he said with a spark of humour in his eye, as he drew the young man down the shelving. “I think you will find it not the least interesting aspect of your new duties.”

He beckoned to where the platform sprang from the floor of the main study. The two men ascended the spiral staircase, their steps echoing hollowly on the treads.

The shadowy statues leered darkly from their niches but Trumble had little time to take in their detail or any other particulars of the interesting minutiae strewn about in such profusion in this esoteric corner. Dr. Fabri took him over to the curtains which he drew aside with a silken cord. Facing the two men was a large bronze door, about six feet high, whose golden surface caught the light in dull, undulating reflections.

Trumble then saw that the bas-relief design on the door, magnificently executed, depicted a Sabbat. Nude figures writhed in a circle on some deserted heathland and the artist, with a cunning amounting to genius, had made his horrific vision stand out with startling reality, doubly emphasized, of course, by the medium he had chosen. The figures seemed to move within the frame of the door and Trumble felt a great stir of the heart as he gazed in fascination. There was a rough altar in the centre of the design, he saw, and a goat-form conducting the rites.

A naked girl formed the top of the altar; there was a bowl on her stomach and another girl lay across her knees. Assistants supported the second girl and the goat-figure appeared to be cutting her throat over the bowl. Trumble gazed on with fascinated distaste. Fabri glanced at him with obvious pleasure. “After Callot,” he said with great satisfaction. “One of my little fancies.”

He pulled back the bronze catch of the great door and led the way into a large chamber; concealed lighting clicked on as he opened the door. It was a curious room, Trumble thought; perhaps the most curious he had ever seen, though it was also strangely commonplace. Walls and floor appeared to be lined with zinc; there were grilles high up in the walls and in the ceiling, evidently to do with the air-conditioning, and racks of books, many with tattered leather bindings and faded gold inscriptions. Trumble noticed many rare works bound in vellum; among them *De Vermis Mysteriis* by Ludvig Prinn and *De Masticatione Mortuorum* by Philip Rohr, the *Dissertatio de Vampyris Seruinsibus* by Zopfius, Härenberg's extremely rare *Von Vampyren*, together with a contemporary account of the Salem Witch Trials. This section was an incongruous sight, set as it was among modern filing cabinets and a great shelf of ledgers, each numbered and indexed.

On the green-leather-topped desk which stood some yards within the chamber was an open ledger which was inscribed in green ink; and a bundle of newspaper cuttings. A faint humming filled the air.

"This room fulfils two functions," said Dr. Fabri, "and will be the scene of your main duties. My most important and rarest manuscripts are stored here. The air-conditioning keeps them at a constant temperature."

He ran his eyes over the packed shelves with satisfaction. He moved farther down the room and drew Trumble's attention to the ledgers. He chuckled softly.

"These are my records of notabilities, kept through the medium of newspaper cuttings and other material, sent me from all over the world. Obituaries, you understand, of all the celebrities and public persons whose careers interest me."

He waved his hand towards the shelf of ledgers. "I call them the Archives of the Dead."

He moved back again to the desk. "You will see from this daily ledger the name of the person or persons who are to be added to the scrapbooks. Then, when the material arrives by post, it is cut out and transferred to the appropriate ledger. The information is then cross-indexed in these filing cabinets. The system is simplicity itself."

Trumble moved to the desk, his mind turning over the odd nature of the task; he saw that Fabri's records were incredibly detailed and contained much out-of-the-way information not only from famous newspapers and magazines but obscure journals in German, French, and Russian. He looked down the green-inked entries in the smaller book which stood open on the desk—like the Book of Judgement, he could not help thinking wryly to himself—and noted that the two latest names, in Fabri's impeccable handwriting, were those of a scenic designer and a ballet dancer.

"If you have any queries, Mr. Trumble," said Dr. Fabri, waving his hand to indicate the contents of the room, "now is the time. You will be left much to yourself, I am afraid, as I have my own affairs to pursue. We are all alone here, except for Joseph, and the cleaning women come in during the mornings twice a week."

While Trumble put a few questions to Dr. Fabri, his mind continued to debate his astonishing good fortune; for he had soon grasped that his duties for the moment would be merely nominal. He could not really see why Dr. Fabri needed a secretary at all but on the other hand if he were prepared to pay so handsomely in return for such agreeably lightweight tasks, Trumble, for one, was not prepared to argue. The two men parted on the best of

terms; Fabri was driving over to see some friends and would not be back until late afternoon. Joseph would prepare Trumble's lunch and he could work on at the indexing undisturbed during the afternoon, in order to get the doctor's records up to date.

If he had the time he was to go through Fabri's correspondence and prepare answers to the routine matters for the doctor's signature and would, naturally, answer the door or telephone and deal with any enquiries. Trumble sat at the desk, quietly jubilant for some minutes after the rumble of the doctor's car had died away down the drive. He glanced round at the massed volumes on the shelves and then down again to the material awaiting his attention; the air-conditioning hummed quietly to itself and the scent of the spring flowers, arranged in big jars round the main library, came to him through the bronze door of the room, which had been propped open with a large stone ornament.

He gazed at the doctor's green-ink entry once again. He picked up his pen and turned to the top of a large, blank page of the current ledger, which had been left open on the desk with the cuttings. In neat block capitals, underlined with a ruler, he wrote: FAENZA, BORIS b. 1884. Then he set to work.

Three days passed. Three days in which Trumble gradually came to know the ascetic but not unpleasant routine of the Fabri household. In the mornings he took dictation from Dr. Fabri in answer to the incoming mail; the doctor had an astonishing correspondence from all over the world, much of it from such exotic places as Venezuela or the Gulf of Mexico. Many of these were in the languages of the country of origin and Dr. Fabri would peruse them and then rattle out his replies in English with machine-gun precision. More than once Trumble was glad that

he had taken the trouble thoroughly to master shorthand during the earlier days of his career.

He thought he was doing quite a good job and Fabri evidently concurred; though he did not say so, Trumble fancied that he occasionally caught a glimpse of approval in his employer's eye, when he imagined that Trumble's head was bowed studiously over the page of his notebook to the exclusion of all other things. The two men would lunch together in a not unpleasant silence, in the room which looked onto the garden and which Trumble remembered so vividly from his first evening in the house; Joseph would wait on them without talking. The food was impeccably cooked and the wines were invariably perfectly chosen and served at the correct temperature.

Occasionally there would be time in the mornings for Trumble's work on the Archives of the Dead; he had taken up Dr. Fabri's remark, which he ascribed to his employer's somewhat grim vein of humour, and applied it in a mocking manner to the indexing upon which he was engaged. Dr. Fabri's tastes appeared to be completely catholic and it almost seemed to Trumble that he was obsessed with recording the deaths of everyone of importance who died in the world, without regard to their profession or occupation. Trumble had also taken time to study the earlier ledgers, which went back a good many years, and was astonished to see the meticulous way in which the deaths of bishops, film stars, footballers, philosophers, politicians, and university professors had been noted.

Writers, musicians, and those in the graphic arts were recorded in separate volumes, coded blue, and Trumble, though of course he had never questioned Dr. Fabri on the subject, concluded that the doctor had a special interest in those arts; particularly as

many of the writers were also savants who had been authorities on witchcraft and the occult. In this respect the rare volumes in Latin and mediaeval French, which were evidently of immense value, came in useful, and already Trumble had had occasion to check a reference from an original source, when the printed information on his subject's career had been scanty.

His afternoons were mostly free and two days later Trumble motored over to Guildford, posted some letters, had tea in a cafe, and then, because it was cold and raining, visited the cinema for a couple of hours. The film was good and when Trumble regained the street in the early evening the rain had stopped and the sun shone fitfully. He drove back to Linnet Ridge in high spirits and decided to spend the hour before dinner catching up on the indexing. He now worked with the great bronze door closed; there was a handle on his side and the air-conditioning made the room pleasantly fresh and conducive to uninterrupted concentration.

He filled up three pages with closely detailed cuttings and photographs on the career of an obscure South American diplomat, culled mainly from Brazilian newspapers, and blotted the gum at the edges of the cuttings with satisfaction. He wondered idly what tomorrow would bring; Dr. Fabri invariably left the names of the day's obituary subjects for him in the master ledger, in the distinctive green ink that he had already come to know so well. Trumble did not start this work until mid-morning so he imagined that his employer would make his selections from the principal daily newspapers and possibly from announcements via other media, such as radio and television. The main material for the file arrived by mail two or three days later, usually from three major cuttings agencies in England and from a number of news services overseas.

The work had its own fascination, though Trumble might once have felt it to be morbid; it was certainly no more so than similar departments kept up by the major newspapers and known to their respective staffs as "The Morgue." In fact, Trumble felt Dr. Fabri's own system was preferable, as he understood the newspapers wrote their obituaries in advance, which did rather smack of the macabre, to his way of thinking. He put down the pen, looked at the completed page, and replaced the ledger on the shelf with the others. He would do the indexing on these last items tomorrow.

Trumble ate dinner on his own that evening and was sitting in the lounge engrossed in a novel at about nine o'clock when he heard Dr. Fabri's car in the drive. A few moments later the hall door slammed with hollow resonance and the measured tread of his employer passed up the staircase; shortly afterwards Dr. Fabri's bedroom door closed. Trumble picked up his half-finished drink and resumed his book.

The house was unnaturally quiet and occasionally he would put down the volume and listen briefly but the only sounds were the faint sputtering of wood from the fire, for the nights were still cold as yet, and the muted sounds of Joseph from his quarters at the back of the house. The mantel clock measured a few minutes after ten and Trumble was thinking about retiring to his own room when the sharp, peremptory strokes of the front door bell, jabbed by an evidently impatient finger, startled him.

He gained the hall and was opening the door before Joseph had made his appearance. A tall, silvery-haired man of some distinction, wearing a dress suit and black tie under a dark raincoat, stood in the porch. In the background shimmered the gleaming bulk of a grey Mercedes. Trumble hesitated for a

fraction and the man in the porch seemed slightly taken aback also. The older man was the first to recover himself.

"I would like to speak with Dr. Fabri if it isn't too inconvenient," he said. "He is expecting me."

Trumble introduced himself and the two men shook hands. "I usually arrange his appointments but I am new here and the doctor may have forgotten to tell me," said Trumble. He motioned the visitor forward into the hall and closed the door behind him. Joseph had now appeared and took the tall man's coat.

"However, if you made an appointment I have no doubt Dr. Fabri is expecting you," Trumble continued. "He came in about an hour ago."

The visitor seemed pleased at this, but just then the sound of Dr. Fabri's footsteps sounded at the stairhead.

"Would you like me to announce you?" Trumble asked.

The visitor shook his head. "That won't be necessary," he said decisively. Joseph was hovering at the back of the hall but Dr. Fabri was now halfway down the staircase, and he vanished in the direction of the kitchen.

"Delighted to see you, my dear fellow," said Dr. Fabri, shaking his visitor warmly by the hand. "I was worried in case you might have been delayed."

"Not this night. You know, certainly, not this night of all nights," said his visitor sharply.

Dr. Fabri laughed shortly. "No, no, of course not," he said soothingly, laying his hand on the other's arm. "You go ahead into the study and I will join you immediately."

He turned to Trumble, his strong face impassive in the soft light of the hall lamps.

"I shan't require you any further tonight, Robert," he said. "We shall be quite late. I have told Joseph he may retire. I will show my guest out myself."

Trumble nodded. He went back into the lounge and finished his drink. There was no sound from the direction of the study, into which both men had disappeared. He dragged the heavy brass guard over the remains of the fire, recovered his book from the armchair, and switched off the lights. Joseph nodded to him darkly as he crossed the hall. The big, taciturn handyman was hovering near the study door, behind which could now be made out the low murmur of voices. Trumble walked up to the landing and sought his own room.

He quickly prepared for bed, drew the covers over him, and again settled down to another chapter of his book; this time, for some indefinable reason, the texture of the writing did not seem to absorb him as it had done formerly and it was still a few minutes short of eleven when he put the book aside on the table and extinguished the lamp. Thin cracks of light came through under his bedroom door from farther down the landing; Trumble was just about to shift his position so that he would be facing the darker side of the room when he saw a shadow briefly cross the light coming in under the door. A moment later he heard the faint click of the key as someone locked the door from the outside.

Trumble smiled to himself in the semidarkness; he supposed he ought to object to this rather peculiar procedure, but he could not say the practice inconvenienced him. He had a self-contained suite and if Dr. Fabri liked to confine the occupants of his house to their own portions of the building during the dead hours of the night, he supposed that was his own business. Perhaps he would tackle the doctor about it when he had got to know him a little

better. In the meantime no useful purpose would be served by kicking up a fuss; and the position was quite the best thing of its kind which was likely to come his way in the course of a lifetime.

His head occupied with these and similar thoughts, Trumble soon slept. He found himself awake again in the still of the night. He lay trembling for some moments, trying to collect himself. What had awakened him, or rather what he fancied had awakened him, was a long, high scream which sounded like an animal in pain. Trumble had noted degrees of torment in animals, as in humans, and it seemed to him that the sound which had broken his sleep was of some creature in extremis. He looked at the luminous dial of his watch and saw that it was just after 3:00 A.M. He had therefore slept for nearly four hours.

A glance towards the door showed him that the light in the hall and on the landing had been extinguished. No sound broke the stillness but his own heavy breathing as he listened intently; the darkness of the night pressed heavily on the house and held it as though within a deep vault. Even the owl was silent from the thicket beyond the garden. Trumble felt perspiration in the roots of his hair and he was cold and sticky against his pyjamas. He wondered if he had caught a fever in the damp weather of the last few days. There was no footfall, not the creak of a board; his own heart was like the grumbling of a ponderous piston-engine within the confines of his chest.

Then the owl sounded, sharp and distinct, from the woods beyond the house and with this commonplace noise all the little sounds of the night crept back; Trumble felt his stiff hands relax their frenzied grip on the sheets and his body, with returning warmth, began to relax. Sleep was so subtle on this second occasion that he was not aware of it when unconsciousness finally overtook him.

The following day Dr. Fabri did not appear in the morning though Trumble had heard his car earlier; he took his breakfast, as usual served by the unsmiling Joseph, and just before ten began his work in the small cabinet with the bronze door; as before he had the door closed and kept it shut while he was working. The hum of the air-conditioning seemed to keep him in touch with the rest of the house, and the chamber itself ensured him complete privacy as he could easily hear if anyone approached from outside.

There was a large bronze handle, mate to the one on the face, on his own side of the door and, as if that were not enough, the massive bronze key, made specially to match, was on his own side to avoid him being locked in. It was this key which he handed to Joseph in the evenings when he had finished his scholarly work among the rare books.

But already this morning Dr. Fabri must have been down, for as soon as Trumble was seated at his desk and had commenced to examine the material which awaited his attention, he saw that two new names had been added to the register ledger in the doctor's unmistakable green-inked hand. The first was that of Burnett Fairbarn, an internationally known architect. Trumble had heard his death announced on the news the night before; he had died in a mountaineering accident on a peak in the Andes the previous day. The latest name was that of Lyle Bassett, of whom Trumble had never heard; there was no information available on either man, Trumble found when he searched the doctor's heap of notes: the first details for documenting purposes would no doubt come from the evening papers that night. Trumble continued with his usual pursuits and the day slowly assumed the pattern of those preceding. Dr. Fabri returned to the house for lunch; the two men walked in the garden; Trumble took some dictation and,

a little later, drove over to Guildford for tea. He bought the two evening papers on his way back, intending to go through them after dinner.

But another session of note-taking followed and when Trumble returned to the archive room for more indexing at about half-past ten, the newspapers were still on the desk unread. It was only when, his immediate task finished, Trumble turned to peruse the day's news that he saw a long story on an inside page of Fairbarn's climbing accident. There was over a column of space in both papers devoted to this, together with photographs of the architect, and some of his principal buildings. When he had finished pasting these entries into the large book and had suitably indexed them, Trumble remembered the second entry on the ledger. He turned again to verify the name and then went through the inside pages. He found what he was looking for in a short item on the front page of the *Evening Standard*.

It merely said that the body of Lyle Bassett, a somewhat obscure ballet choreographer and composer, had been found dead in a blazing car near the Guildford bypass in the early hours of the same day. Trumble entered the notice and found a smaller piece in the stop-press column of the *Evening News*. It referred to another story on the inside page and this was an expanded version of the facts already known, but giving details of Bassett's career. Trumble closed both books, tidied his desk, and went to bed rather satisfied with his labours.

The midday post the following day contained a great deal of material for Dr. Fabri's archives, together with a number of business letters which had to be answered, and Trumble was not able to return to his indexing in the room with the bronze door until nearly twenty-four hours later. He then saw that he had rather a lot of leeway to make up; Dr. Fabri had added another

four or five names in green ink in the ledger and the pile of clippings and magazine articles had reached alarming proportions.

Trumble went swiftly through the material, arranging it in piles and subject matter, preparatory to making the entries. His hand faltered when he picked up the last clipping which consisted of several inches of text and a large photograph; the room suddenly became hot and stuffy and Trumble put the cutting down on the desk with a hand which had begun to behave in an uncontrollable manner. He studied the face again; the picture was that of the man he had showed into the hall of Linnet Ridge a little over two days earlier. He checked back over the original entry; it was the man who had died in the wrecked car.

The name was Lyle Bassett.

Trumble did not mention this fact to Dr. Fabri. His procedure was strange, even to himself, and no application of logic could account for it. Even more unusual was the fact that Dr. Fabri himself did not bring up the subject; it was impossible that his guest's fatal accident could have escaped his attention, unless Joseph had placed the cuttings in position on the secretary's desk. In which case that would explain the matter; Trumble embraced this theory almost in relief. Joseph's taciturnity was notorious in the household and he might, in his extraordinary way, have kept his own counsel.

In the meantime Trumble avoided all conversation which might lead round to Bassett's visit to the house and hoped that the doctor himself might make the discovery while going through the record books. But in any case opportunities for conversation with the doctor were becoming more limited; as the weeks went by and the spring advanced he appeared more seldom at meals,

and apart from dictation and matters relating to business correspondence, Trumble had little contact with him.

He worked on in his cabinet and was left more and more to his own affairs, though he had no doubt that Joseph, who was undoubtedly in his employer's confidence, kept a discreet eye on the secretary's movements and reported back to the doctor how his time had been spent. Trumble did not resent this; after all, he reasoned to himself, the doctor was paying him well, he was living in some comfort and style, and though the hours were sometimes irregular, he was not greatly inconvenienced and could not honestly say that he was overworked.

He slept more easily at nights also and he had noted during the last week that his room was no longer locked after he had gone up to bed; evidently he had proved his loyalty and the doctor had decided that he could be trusted with the run of the house. Trumble was wryly amused at the thought; Dr. Fabri might have an international reputation as an authority on the black arts, but in private life he was perfectly proper and his household disappointingly normal, so far as Trumble could see.

Not that he had expected out-of-the-way happenings, but he had hoped that his employer would unlock some of the hidden treasures of his mind to him during the long summer evenings, especially as the doctor and the poet evidently shared many tastes and common viewpoints on matters normally considered forbidden among those in what, for want of a better phrase, was termed polite society.

And yet there was an incident a few days later which illustrated vividly to Trumble the darker side of Dr. Fabri's nature. It had been unnaturally cold for an England poised on the threshold of May and fires had been lit in the principal rooms to supplement the central heating. For some reason or other the doctor and his

secretary had forsaken the study and were seated at the dining-room table where Fabri had been dictating sections of one of a new series of lectures for the following autumn.

He had called this particular talk "The Past Which is to Come," a title which had vividly impressed itself upon Trumble; in fact he wished he had thought of it himself. His pen scratched rapidly over the paper as Dr. Fabri rattled on; his employer proceeded in quick, staccato sentences as ideas came to him, though when the time arrived he would deliver the speech in a steady, leisurely flow in which paragraphs, phrases, sentences were all linked immutably like the loops of a chain. But while dictating, Dr. Fabri would turn his deep, piercing eyes ruminatively on Trumble as he searched for the apposite phrase: then he would proceed to deliver it unfalteringly, so that the secretary was hard put to it to keep up. Once he had found his thought, he would polish and assemble it in his mind before giving utterance, so that he never had to correct the typed word once it was on paper.

It was an admirable method, a tribute to the skill and precision of Dr. Fabri's remarkable mind, but it was a harsh discipline for a notetaker such as Trumble, whose shorthand had fallen somewhat into disuse and he was sometimes mentally panting far behind in a desperate effort to keep pace with the doctor's finely shaped and elaborately wrought prose. After the first session, which was in marked contrast to Fabri's methods of replying to letters, Trumble practised his note-taking alone in his room for several hours, so that he faced the second and subsequent ordeals more comprehensively equipped.

"The cancer of time eats inexorably at the fabric of human lives," said Dr. Fabri, the phrase seeming to hang on the hushed air of the dining-room.

“We drag our pasts behind us as a snail its slime.”

He paused for a moment, his cigar smoke rising steadily upwards towards the panelled ceiling with hardly a tremor, the air within the room was so still.

Trumble's pen raced on over the paper until, with relief, he heard Dr. Fabri come to the end of his discourse. He flexed his hand to relieve the cramp, aware of the doctor's eyes fixed upon him with sardonic humour. Dr. Fabri stretched himself in his chair.

“Is there anything there which you feel requires amplification, Robert?” he asked.

What he really meant, Trumble understood well enough, was whether the latter had managed to take down everything accurately and wanted him to check anything again. Trumble flipped through his pages of voluminous notes, hoping that he would have no difficult transcription problems.

“There was a point here, Doctor,” he said diffidently. “I believe my note is accurate but I didn't quite understand the meaning.”

He searched for the passage while Dr. Fabri waited politely, his dark eyes a startling contrast to his white hair and tufted eyebrows.

Trumble found the place and read, “In this Key you may behold, as in a mirror, the distinct functions of the spirits, and how they are to be drawn into communication in all places, seasons, and times.”

“Well?” said Dr. Fabri, a little impatiently. “It is a quotation, of course.”

“I understand that,” Trumble replied, “and there are many such passages throughout your lecture. Am I to take it that this is intended to be taken literally?”

“Certainly,” said Dr. Fabri calmly. “I could give you a number of instances. It is, of course, a power given to very few and one certainly not to be abused. You are desirous of learning more of such things—from a personal aspect, that is?”

He pronounced the last words in a very soft and curious manner and Trumble became suddenly aware that he was trespassing on very strange and dangerous ground.

“He who would learn the secrets of my Master must be prepared for long and arduous preparations. It is a hard and thorny way.”

The air seemed to have grown close and sultry and Trumble’s head began to swim; he was aware of Dr. Fabri’s eyes which were now bright and sharp and boring into his.

“Your Master?” Trumble asked foolishly, trying to fight the nausea which threatened to overcome him.

“Of course,” said Dr. Fabri.

“My Master,” he added softly. “We are all the servants of One Master, Mr. Trumble.”

Dr. Fabri laughed quietly and with the laughter the tension and oppression lifted from the room and Trumble felt he could breathe again; he wiped his forehead, which was wet with perspiration.

“Are you well?” the doctor asked in some concern. He went to the sideboard and came back with a full glass which he thrust into his secretary’s hand. Trumble drank the whisky as though it had been water and then felt normality returning to him. He gathered up his notes with a muttered apology to the doctor. They did not again return to the subject that evening.

Several more weeks passed and it was now mid-May. Despite the season the weather had continued cold; Trumble was by now

thoroughly accustomed to his duties; he continued the odd task of indexing in the inner cabinet and felt he had thoroughly mastered the complexities of Dr. Fabri's dictation style, while his treatment of the correspondence could not have been bettered by a professional secretary, he felt. Best of all, he had commenced to write again; the sheltered atmosphere of Linnet Ridge had released something long pent-up in him and in his spare time in the afternoons and often in the evenings, he began sketching out the movements of an epic poem in praise of the Old Gods.

Curiously enough, there abruptly came a day of great heat, among those of cold, wet January-like weather; Fabri and Trumble had been seated long after breakfast was cleared that morning, going over some proofs of a projected book by Dr. Fabri on magic as practised by the older cultures of the world.

Quite casually, in the middle of their discussion on business matters, Dr. Fabri turned to his secretary and said, "By the way, I am expecting a number of people this evening. We shall be occupying the study so I would be grateful if you would arrange to vacate the ground floor of the house by nine-thirty tonight."

Dr. Fabri's tone was courteous and his words polite, but it was obvious to Trumble that his pronouncement was an order; so he did not question his employer, though he was naturally curious on the subject.

"Would you like me to wait up?" he asked. "I could go into Guildford for the evening, if you wish, and return to the house late if you require any help in entertaining your guests."

"That won't be necessary, Robert," Dr. Fabri said smoothly. "I should appreciate it, though, if you would receive the visitors between eight and nine o'clock, so I should cancel any arrangements you may have made regarding Guildford. Joseph will lock up later. He is used to our activities."

When Trumble thought over the conversation later in the day he felt his curiosity roused by the phrasing of Dr. Fabri's last sentence; he wondered idly what activities were meant. And if Joseph were used to them, how frequent they might be. Apart from the visit of the ill-fated Bassett there were few guests to Linnet Ridge, and those only during the afternoons. As the day wore on he found his thoughts turning more and more towards the evening and it was with something like impatience that he watched the clock during his long hours of indexing in the cabinet, or studied his wristwatch during his turns around the garden.

Just before dinner, which was earlier than usual that night, he cleared those of his personal papers which he felt he might require, and prepared his writing-table in the sitting-room of his own suite upstairs; he felt that if he were to be denied the use of the ground floor that night he would at least be able to put his time to good use in composition before retiring. He descended to the ground floor again just in time for dinner, to find Dr. Fabri already at table.

To his surprise Trumble noted that there was a third person already seated and in conversation with his employer. The two men rose as Trumble entered and Dr. Fabri made haste to introduce his companion, though the secretary had already recognized the strong, clear-minted head of Zadek, the celebrated cellist, who was currently giving a series of concerts in the London area. Joseph, who had been standing in sullen silence, now bustled forward as Dr. Fabri snapped his fingers, and served the soup.

When he had withdrawn once more, Dr. Fabri put the two men at ease by talking smoothly and flowingly of general matters and gradually the meal was transformed into a pleasant arena of

reminiscence and anecdote, of philosophical musings, all backed by a wide range of scholarship and cultured taste. Trumble had seldom heard his employer in this vein and indeed, it would have been hard to better his conversation; Trumble himself confined his own comments to brief generalities in answer to specific questions.

Zadek, Trumble thought, was either a Czech or of Eastern European extraction and though his English was good, his guttural tones and occasional hesitations of pronunciation made it sometimes difficult to follow the trend of his thoughts. But despite this, he had a wide grounding in the liberal humanities and his conversation was not confined merely to musical matters; allowing for the language difficulties, he spoke humorously and well, and the meal flowed along in a pattern composed of laughter, mellow reminiscence, and good fellowship.

They had sat down to table early, a little after half-past six; and now it was nearly eight o'clock, Joseph had just come in to remind them. Trumble sipped his second liqueur with his black coffee and felt that he had more than upheld his own end of the conversation. Zadek had also heard of Trumble's efforts as a poet, to the secretary's barely concealed astonishment, and the two men had, in fact, treated him as their peer. Though flattered, Trumble did wonder, as the meal progressed, whether the cellist had not been briefed by Fabri before his arrival in the dining-room.

Even so, it was a pleasant thought of the doctor's, and not for the first time the secretary felt his heart warming to him. He was a little strange, not to say eccentric in his ways, but no one could complain of their treatment under his roof. But now Joseph was standing at his elbow and communicating unmistakably by his manner that Trumble should prepare himself for the guests who

were expected between eight and nine o'clock. So Trumble rose to his feet, excused himself, and a few minutes later stationed himself within easy earshot of the front door.

He had not long to wait; it was just three minutes past eight when the first visitors announced themselves. These were a tall, thin woman in her mid-fifties, accompanied by a plump young man in his early thirties. Joseph, impassive as one of the wooden images in the doctor's collection, relieved them of their hats and coats while Trumble, murmuring polite conventionalities, showed them to the study. He did not enter himself but merely ushered them through and closed the door behind them.

In all, he must have passed through something like thirty people between eight and nine o'clock, when the flow finally began to slacken off. Though he recognized no one, Trumble felt there must have been more than one person of public eminence among the gathering; they were about evenly divided between men and women but the age range fell into two distinct patterns. The men were from about thirty to sixty at a rough guess, while the women's ages ranged between twenty and about fifty-five.

All were well dressed and highly literate in their conversation and manner; without exception all seemed to have arrived by private car and none of them addressed Trumble in terms other than the polite greetings normally exchanged among total strangers. To his fumbled attempts at small talk they maintained a discreet silence until they were beyond the study door. Joseph remained in the hall throughout the entire proceedings and stationed himself directly in front of the study whenever he was not engaged in dealing with hats and coats. His manner, too, did not encourage any approach from Trumble.

Finding himself ignored in this manner, the secretary retired to a side room with a novel between his excursions to the door and

back; after nine o'clock he found his services were no longer required and as the half hour chimed he found the silent-footed Joseph at his elbow.

"I think that is the last of the ladies and gentlemen, sir," he said softly, in that politely insolent manner which the secretary found so offensive. He could not have made the situation more plain if he had said, "I think it is time you followed your instructions and retired upstairs." So Trumble elaborately stretched himself, smoothed out the cushion at his elbow, and took his time in closing his book.

"Thank you, Joseph, that will be all," he said by way of feeble revenge. The servant stared at him a moment longer with smouldering eyes, then abruptly turned and went silently out of the door. A moment later the main hall-light was extinguished. Trumble waited as long as he felt he dared—after all, he did not want to bring Dr. Fabri out to see what was delaying him—and five minutes later ascended the oak staircase with as good grace as he could muster.

Joseph was still standing in front of the door; Trumble saw that he was wearing some sort of dark cloak like that of a coachman. The man's head was silhouetted against the deep pinks and greys of the convoluted intestines of the Bosch painting which had so disturbed him earlier; Trumble could not help but feel that it was an appropriate background for Joseph's saturnine features. Then the secretary had passed the head of the stairs and was within his own room.

For more than two hours he wrestled in his room with the difficult metres of the verse-form he had chosen for his new work, but the felicitous phrase eluded him. He got up at length from the table; there was no noise in all the house. He extinguished the lights in the sitting-room and passed through into the bedroom;

light shining from under the door which led onto the landing showed him that Dr. Fabri's visitors had not yet gone; otherwise the lamps in the hall on the ground floor would have been switched off. And he had heard no sound of cars departing.

It wanted but a few minutes of midnight and again Trumble felt tiredness sapping the strength of his limbs; once in his pyjamas he looked out at the garden but the night was dark and there was little to be seen. He got into bed, turned out the light, and was soon asleep.

It seemed but a moment before he started awake; some unusual noise had aroused him from a deep sleep which it was usually impossible to disturb. Trumble was facing the wall, but as the room was in semidarkness he reasoned that light was still shining in under his bedroom door. A glance over his shoulder confirmed this. His watch showed the time as being a quarter past two and its steady tick reassured him. He sat up in bed then and pushed away the sheets, his mind quite alert. A moment later he again heard the sound which had penetrated the walls of sleep; the low murmur of many voices seemingly from far away.

He got out of bed and padded over towards the door. Again he found it unlocked. Trumble hesitated for a fraction and then once more heard the low, insidious noise that mumbled like a dark sea swirling within rocky pools on some lonely coast beyond the world's fringe. His feet found the warmth of his carpet slippers instinctively; already he was shrugging on his thin silk dressing-gown. He opened the door cautiously but the corridor and landing were silent and deserted.

One solitary lamp burned in the dusk of the hall he saw, as he gained the staircase; his form concealed by a thick corner post, his eyes searched the darkness below. To his relief Joseph was no longer standing sentinel. He felt no fear; curiosity had driven it

out. He was impelled towards the mysterious noise which he was convinced was coming from the interior of Dr. Fabri's study. The low, mumbling sound came again as he hesitated and then he went with a rush born of desperate courage down the staircase, as though the interruption had given him the confidence to move under its thick, muttered cover.

He reached the study door without incident and felt the smooth-fitting lock turn noiselessly at his pressure on the handle; he slipped inside into the comfort of almost complete darkness. He crouched behind a high-backed chair, his heart thudding uncomfortably in his throat. The darkness ahead of him was suddenly split by soft red light which blossomed beyond the windows leading onto the garden; Trumble could see little by the fantastic flicker, but he noted once again the ruinous dereliction of the grounds in the faint glare. He moved over towards the windows, careful not to bump into the furniture, but when he reached them the pale fire had burnt to a dusky umber. He was reminded irresistibly of Poe's "red-litten windows" in "The Haunted Palace."

While he crouched irresolute, another low moaning murmur started up within the room; Trumble felt his legs turn to water and he crouched sweating in the shadow as the red glow grew within the garden. Then he saw the explanation; the light was coming not from the grounds but from within the house.

Somewhere below him, light was flickering and shimmering from a window inside the building and staining the lawns with faint amber. With this he recovered something of his courage; his first thought was the large platform approached by the spiral staircase, but his heart failed him as he considered the difficulty of the ascent in the dark. The sounds appeared to be coming from within the cabinet where Trumble normally worked and yet he

knew that it would have been impossible to contain thirty people within its narrow limits.

Instead, he compromised; somehow, he dragged himself up the staircase and towards the blue curtains at the end of the room; lying in the comparative safety of a large settee which sheltered him, he cradled his head on his hands and listened intently. He felt he could go no farther without giving himself away, but at least he could make out what was being said by the chanting voices. And Trumble realized that it was desperately important that he should not give himself away, that he should not be discovered here in these damning circumstances at half-past two in the morning.

He felt sick and ill and his teeth began to chatter as the sense of what he heard began to penetrate his consciousness; the mumbling was repeated, a single voice then replied, and the mumbling took up what the single voice was saying, amplifying it much as a congregation follows the lead of a priest. But this was like nothing Trumble had ever listened to in his life. Interested as he was in the occult and a dabbler on the fringe of things unseen, the ceremony taking place was so blasphemous and perverted that he trembled for his sanity.

All the strength went out of his limbs and he seemed to have fainted for a short while; when he came to himself again a different stage in the ceremony had been reached. Things were evidently rising to a climax; there was exultation and ecstasy in the voices and a black, savage anger, and their responses to the leader's exhortations were becoming short and staccato in their chanting phrases. Trumble tried to blot out the words from his mind, but they slipped into his brain as through a sieve and burnt there like molten lead.

"Save Us, Lord Satan, we pray thee," intoned the single voice.

“Save the Ancient One, O Lord Satan,” responded the congregation.

“Accept this, our Offering, with Thy blessing, Lord Satan,” said the single voice.

“The Offering, Lord Satan!” almost shrieked the worshippers.

“Accept this, our sacrifice, O Lord of the Serfs,” said the ringing voice.

“The sacrifice of the Ancient One, O Lord!” came the response.

“Bless us with Thy fertility, O Lord of the Flies,” the calm voice intoned.

“Accept this, our sacrifice, O Lord!” the mass of voices mumbled.

Overcome with shame and loathing, Trumble remained in a trembling heap, unable to move and quite powerless to blot out the sounds of the vile things he knew were happening only a few yards from his prostrate form. There was a long silence which turned his blood to ice and kept his ears straining for the unspeakable climax.

“Behold, the entrails of the Lamb, O Master!” said the single voice in ringing triumph.

“The Entrails, Lord Satan, Most Holy Master!” shouted the entire congregation.

Then came a sound which Trumble sought in vain to blot from his consciousness; a great, welling cry which appeared to burst from the bowels of the earth, rising to a scream which indicated a human being at the utmost pitch of agony. It echoed and burst in Trumble’s eardrums like the last paeon of souls rotting in hell, and the poet, shaking uncontrollably and almost vomiting with the extremity of his terror, felt the sound to be the aural equivalent of the torn viscera in the Bosch painting in the hall.

Then the shriek cut off and was followed by a loathsome slopping noise which was as quickly drowned by the roaring approval of the congregation.

Even in his piteous state of nerves Trumble felt he must make a supreme effort; by a tremendous exertion of will he dragged himself several yards back in the direction of the study door. Trembling as though with ague, tottering like an old man, he at last clawed himself upright and gained the entrance. His hand was almost on the knob when a quick footstep sounded in the hall. Trumble fell to the floor behind an armchair and crouched with thudding heart. The door was opened, letting in a long shaft of light from the hall; fortunately, whoever it was left the door open, in order to pick his way through the darkened room. As he heard the footsteps ascend the spiral staircase, Trumble slipped through the opening, praying that his shadow on the floor would not be noticed by the ascending figure, which had its back to him.

Unfortunately, as he made for the staircase, reeling as though with fatigue, Trumble knocked against a table and made a loud clattering noise; with an access of terror he heard the footsteps rapidly descending the staircase. They were coming across the study floor. There was no time for Trumble to conceal himself. Gathering the frayed ends of his shrieking nerves he forced himself to walk towards the study door without concealment. Joseph met him at the half-open door. The dark, hard face was expressionless in the dim light of the lamp. Trumble saw that he was wearing the dark black cloak, the collar of which was lined with red silk.

His legs were bare and he wore thonged sandals on his feet. He carried some sort of hood over his arm. Forcing himself to keep his voice calm, Trumble said, "I heard a noise which woke me up. I was just coming down to see if everything was all right."

"Everything is perfectly all right, sir," said Joseph, but his eyes gazed at Trumble with bleak suspicion.

"I thought I heard voices," said Trumble. He knew he had to justify his descent of the staircase and it would hardly do to let Joseph's explanation pass without some expostulation; Trumble had to steel himself to go on. He could not let the servant see that he was so easily satisfied; otherwise his suspicions might become aroused. And Trumble had much to do to prevent himself from falling when he imagined what might be the penalty if Dr. Fabri realized that he had been in the study this morning and that he had heard . . . what he had heard.

"There is a meeting, sir," said Joseph patiently, as though he were explaining a simple proposition to a child.

"That would account for the voices," said Trumble, seeming satisfied with the servant's answer.

"The Society of the Sabbath, sir," Joseph went on. "The ladies and gentlemen you met earlier tonight. They are making a tape recording of certain occult rites. It is one of Dr. Fabri's major interests. The recordings are very popular among Society members."

"I see," said Trumble, simulating relief. "As long as all is in order. I'm sorry if I disturbed you. Is there anything I can do at all?"

He made as though to move towards the study door. Joseph did not appear to shift position but his tall form was suddenly blocking the way.

"Please return to bed, sir," he said gravely.

"Well, thank you," said Trumble, retreating to the foot of the staircase. "I'd appreciate it if you didn't mention this to Dr. Fabri. I felt there might be something wrong and I don't want him to think me an over-imaginative daydreamer."

Joseph allowed himself a faint glimmer of a smile. He had shut

the study door behind him at the beginning of the conversation and Trumble could no longer hear the mumble of those hateful voices.

“I quite understand, sir,” said Joseph. He stood and watched as Trumble slowly ascended the staircase. When the poet had gained the landing he heard the noise of the key of the study door being turned in the lock. The corridor started to bend and warp in front of him as he made his way to his room. He somehow groped to the bed and then his legs gave way beneath him. He lay gasping for breath until he found the strength to crawl between the sheets.

Trumble felt so ill next morning that he sent a message to Dr. Fabri, via Joseph. The servant brought food to his room and all day the secretary lay in a fevered stupor. He took dinner in bed and was relieved to hear from the servant that Dr. Fabri excused himself from visiting his bedside; he sent his best wishes and hoped that Trumble would be feeling better in the morning. Indeed, by ten o'clock in the evening Trumble was so far recovered that he put on his dressing-gown and sat in the other room for a little while.

When he went through into the bathroom his face in the mirror was so strange that he had difficulty in recognizing himself; apart from the stubble on his cheeks and his dishevelled hair, there was a glint in his eyes which was alien to him and his complexion was almost like chalk. Trumble had to admit that he had been badly frightened; but, looking back, realized at this distance in time that he might have been mistaken; while he had not believed Joseph's explanation regarding the recording at the time it had been made, he now felt that it could have been possible.

If there were a Society of the Sabbath they may well have been

doing a taped reconstruction of a Black Mass or Sabbat, but Trumble found this difficult to reconcile with the demoniac and horrifying quality of his experience the night before. Dr. Fabri had not been to see him, neither had Joseph conveyed any message on the subject, so it was just possible that the affair had a commonplace explanation; but even so, Trumble realized that he would have to go very carefully indeed during the next few days. Despite the depth of terror into which he had been plunged the previous evening, his curiosity had been aroused and he was determined to investigate further.

One thing which could not be explained away was the question posed by a simple exercise in mathematics; namely, how thirty substantial people of both sexes could have been accommodated in the small cabinet in which Trumble normally worked, crowded as it was with a desk, bookshelves, and innumerable reference works. It was an insuperable problem, matched only by the equally weird spectacle of the shifting red lights in the garden. When Trumble felt equal to it he would devote some thought to the matter on the following day.

As it happened, things worked out more easily than he had supposed. Dr. Fabri had gone away for a short period, Joseph informed him when he sat down in his familiar place for breakfast next morning. He did not know when he would be back, but he had left word for the secretary to carry on as usual. Joseph pointed out a pile of opened correspondence Dr. Fabri had left by his plate and withdrew to his own enigmatic duties. Trumble sat long over his coffee and then gathered up the mail and made his way to the cabinet.

He could not repress a faint trembling in the muscles of his legs as he ascended the spiral staircase and the figures in the bronze

Sabbat on the great door seemed to stare mockingly at him as he pulled it open; but once settled at his homely task of indexing the cuttings and cross-referencing his notes, Trumble's ragged nerves relaxed. The time passed, he worked steadily on, and he was pleased to see by eleven o'clock that the pile of reference material in front of him was steadily diminishing. He paused in his efforts and then shuffled through the last cuttings, assessing the work remaining before lunch.

Then the clippings fluttered to the floor, his face turned pale, and again there came an uncontrollable trembling in his limbs. Staring at him from the front page of a popular evening newspaper was a large photograph of a distinguished-looking man Trumble remembered only too well. The picture was captioned: "The Late Ygor Zadek." Over the top was a six-column headline which said: "STAR CELLIST MURDERED IN ESSEX WOOD."

With mounting horror the secretary read how a farm worker had stumbled over the body of the world-famous cellist in a copse at the edge of Epping Forest. The report hinted that the corpse had been shockingly mutilated, evidently before death, according to the pathologist's report; the body had been dumped in the position it had been found after being transported there by car. The police were now concentrating on trying to trace the vehicle from the slender clues they had in their possession, including a distinctive imprint of a tyre-tread.

Sick at heart, Trumble put down the paper after examining the date-line; it was that day's early edition. The body had been found in the early hours of that morning. Trumble did not need to go into elaborate calculations to see that less than twenty-four hours had elapsed since he had last seen Zadek alive and well in Dr. Fabri's house and the discovery of his disembowelled body that

same morning. Trumble remembered the cry he had heard thirty-six hours earlier and again began to tremble uncontrollably.

To calm his racing thoughts he began to rearrange his desk, the trivial, commonplace actions gradually having the effect of calming his nerves and slowing down his churning mind. He bent down to pick up the clippings he had dropped to the floor; he then saw that the grey carpeting which skirted the desk had been pushed aside in his fumbling efforts to raise the papers; a thin hair-line showed in the grey metal floor underneath the carpet. Trumble's heart gave another great jump in his throat.

He got up and went to the door; he listened intently but could hear nothing. He crossed to the study window and was reassured to see Joseph at the other end of the garden; he appeared to be trimming a rose bush. Trumble went back into the cabinet and thought long and deeply. He made up his mind. He closed the bronze door gently, isolating himself from the study and the house. The hum of the air-conditioning went reassuringly on. Then he got to his knees; unrolling the carpet, he disclosed the smooth-fitting edges of a trapdoor.

Raising it by a metal flange let into its edge, Trumble saw a flight of steps leading below; they were modern in design, made of cedarwood, and the treads were covered with rubber. Warm air came up to him. Trumble hesitated but a moment; then, leaving the trapdoor open, he pressed the switch set on the tread at the edge of the staircase and walked down into the cellar.

As neon tubes trembled into radiance in the high panelled ceiling, Trumble saw that the mystery was solved; here was the room for thirty people, a hundred people. The place was like a theatre; there must have been over two hundred leather tip-up seats. The chamber was decorated like a church and almost sybaritic in its luxury; thick pile carpeting covered the floors. The

end of the room where the stage would have been was concealed with dark blue curtains covered with cabalistic symbols. Let into the marble step in front of the curtains was the legend, in gold lettering, which the terrible Aleister Crowley had made his leitmotiv, "Do as Thou Wilt Shall be the Whole of the Law."

Trumble walked down, mounted the marble steps, and parted the curtains; the first thing he saw was two small, half-moon windows high up in the wall, which must have been just above ground level. It was from these, evidently, that the red, flickering lights must have penetrated into the garden.

Trumble turned back to examine the area behind the curtains. There was a black marble altar with a curious dip and cavity let into it; behind the altar, in a niche towering up between the two windows, was an image which, fortunately for the secretary's sanity, was half-hidden in the shadow. The pendulous belly and the monstrous goathhead made it perfectly obvious which form of worship was practised here. A copper bowl was lying on the altar, together with strange-looking instruments, including a bronze knife which had a long runnel let into the blade.

The knife and bowl were sticky and the bowl contained a residue of black viscous fluid which stank in Trumble's nostrils. He was overcome with nausea; turning, he reeled against the altar and putting out his hand to steady himself, felt it come away wet and scarlet. He saw that the whole of the top of the marble was awash with unspeakable foulness. He screamed then in the gloom of that charnel-house place and found himself running up the gangway between the seats, the breath sobbing in his throat.

He found some cloth near the foot of the ladder and wiped his hands clean; he shrank when he noticed that the cloth appeared to be a white robe like a surgeon's smock and that the front of it was already stained scarlet. The nausea rose again in his throat when

he realized what lay underneath the quiet cabinet which he had used all these weeks as his office. He now understood the purpose of Dr. Fabri's unholy ledgers and he knew, too, why the doctor had gone away for a few days. It was not hard to guess that one of his destinations would have been Essex. He had only taken Bassett beyond Guildford, but Trumble realized he would have to widen his area if he were to remain unsuspected.

His feet beat a nervous tattoo on the rungs of the ladder; he switched off the light, replaced the trapdoor, making sure that he left no stains on the metal, and smoothed down the carpet over it. He inspected it anxiously, making sure that all was as it had been originally; his breath rasped unnaturally in his throat. When he got up to the desk he saw that someone had visited the cabinet in his absence; there was a new pile of correspondence on the green leather top. Trumble turned white and bit his lip. He glanced at his watch, saw that the midday post would just have been delivered. Joseph would know. The secretary was actually turning the handle of the bronze door when he found it locked; it was quite immovable.

His hands were bleeding from beating against it, when he realized the effort was quite useless; he calmed down then, noting that the key had been removed from the inside. He would never get out that way. He turned back to the inner cabinet, searching for a means of escape, but the zinc walls were smooth and blank; there was not a join anywhere that he could discern. He would have to see what could be done in the underground chapel, though he dreaded descending again. Unless he could reason with Joseph. Perhaps the servant could hear him if he called out. A microphone within the cabinet, perhaps.

Trumble sweated and he swayed a little as he turned this way and that; the rumble of the air-conditioning went reassuringly on.

But Trumble felt he could detect a faint hissing beyond this. Or was it his imagination? He licked his lips and plucked at his collar. Strangely enough, all fear was leaving him. He stared at the shelves and saw that a metal shutter had rolled back in the metal wall; there was a glass panel set into it.

On the other side stood his employer. Dr. Fabri smiled encouragingly at him.

Trumble opened his mouth as if to say something, changed his mind and closed it again; he staggered as the gas hissed remorselessly into the small chamber, smoothly expunging the life from him. He understood many things as he fell against the desk. The Satanist had not forgotten the importance of the Poet. He had just time to note, entirely without surprise, before he went down to death, that the ledger in front of him was open.

And there, in the Archives of the Dead, as the latest entry, was his own name in Dr. Fabri's impeccable, green-inked writing.



The Flabby Men





I

I did not like the look of the island from the very first. I had come from the capital along an undulating, scree-strewn beach road on the mainland, that circled around great outcrops of splintered firs and pine, and the Switzer was beginning to run out of fuel when I sighted the ferry in the gathering dusk. The lava-like rubble of the shore stretched drearily to an oily, slime-washed sea and against the dark yellow of this sullen background foul, scummy pustules burst and reformed.

The piles of the ferry-landing were red with rust, I noticed, as the machine purred onto the metallized surface of the pier, and a heap of old-fashioned petrol containers lay huddled together on the shingle like the husks of some giant fruit or the whorled shells of monstrous land-crabs.

The wind was rising, bringing with it drifts of cold, pungently tainted spume from farther out, and the harshly striated mass of the island, black, brown, and sickly yellow, gashed the sea about two miles offshore. My ring brought no one from the dusty glass and steel office so badly needing paint and upkeep. I waited and then tried the electric klaxon on the Switzer; it stirred the echoes and sent a few broken-winged birds scuttering clumsily among

the rocks. I tried once more and then gave up; batteries were too precious to waste in this fashion.

Rort should have met me at the landing. I had a vision-tube check on that just before I started, and they knew I was arriving about six. Now it was after seven and the crowd on the island should be alerted. Test conditions were said to be ideal for the next two weeks and I was eager to get ahead with the first. There was little sound in the cove, though farther out white was beginning to show among the folds of yellow; nothing but the slap of foul water, wind strumming over splintered wood, and, for a few brief seconds, a startled buzz as a weather helicopter flapped its way hesitantly southwards.

I had not expected the ferry to be working; that would have been too much, but Rort had said they had got a power launch going which would take me and my traps out. The Switzer would have to take its chance on the jetty with a tarpaulin over it; the swarms of voracious vermin that had been infesting the shore for the past few months might have a go at it, but I doubted whether they would make much impression on its tracks, the only nonmetal component likely to prove edible. Even so I had stripped the machine down to essentials; it looked as though I might have some trouble in getting fuel for the trip back.

The darkness was growing, blurring the outline of rocks and the distant island; the jetty shuddered under the impact of the undertow, and there was a sharp scrabbling and muffled squeaks from the rusting debris at the side of the pier, which I didn't like. Whole parties of people had been devoured by a debased form of giant rat which haunted the seashore, and it was said that the plague of land-crabs had increased of late.

I went to the end of the jetty and winked my flash seawards a few times and then unloaded my cases of equipment and personal

gear. While I was clipping the rubberized tarpaulin over the Switzer I heard the shrill whine of a jet, and a short while after I made out the dim shape of a turbo-launch creaming out from the direction of the island. That would be Rort.

The sougning of the wind had increased and water was slapping stealthily along the filthy foreshore, stirring uneasily among the crumbling rubbish that littered the marge. It was a sad inheritance, I thought, this debilitated world; an aftermath of violence that would have to be painfully reknitted by the industry of a few patient men and women, self-dedicated and working with poor, worn-out tools.

There was a crunch from the shadows and I stabbed the flash beam into the dusk, outlined the slavering, grey, depraved jaw-line, red-rimmed, white-filmed eyes, and slit-nostrilled mask of a large creature like the caricature of a hare, which went hopping off with a clatter among the oil cans. I went over to the Switzer and something else scurried away. There were the marks of sharp teeth on the half-tracks, where the creatures had been tearing the covering. I sprayed the area round the vehicle with a powerful poison I had brought from the stores, which I felt would discourage all but the hardiest and hungriest.

When I had finished, the noise of the jet filled the cove and then eased off as someone throttled down; I went to the edge of the jetty and saw a familiar, grey-hulled Ministry launch bearing the hieroglyphics of the Central Committee. Rort came out of the wheelhouse.

“Sorry to keep you waiting. I came earlier but had to go back over. They get worried if I’m away long. This is the only transport to and from the island you know, and Future knows what things are in the water.”

Rort was a tall, thin man with a tangled stubble of beard; he had

been a research worker in one of the innumerable project teams set up by the Central Committee, and had then been seconded for special duties. He had always been the worrying kind, but now I seemed to detect an even greater nervousness in his manner, as he helped me get the equipment stowed aboard; I set this down to the location of the island and the forsaken atmosphere of this part of the coast.

He told me something of the situation as we put off. There was an oily swell running now, with what would have been whitecaps in years gone by, before poisons clogged the earth, and I sat on a bench in the charthouse with him while he steered. Rort was definitely uneasy but when I questioned him, he shrugged it off as an indefinable something. One concrete occurrence had rattled him though, which was partly a cause of his unease. Unloading the group's equipment a few weeks before, he had slipped on the slime-covered landing and a case of radio energy cells—their only supply—had gone to the bottom.

That meant the sending of test data over the transmitter to base was strictly limited, to conserve energy; and fuel for the launch was short. The relief helicopter was not due for a month; in another week or two there might be difficulties in communications. I asked Rort about the island; he cleared his throat with a rasping noise, a sign of dislike with him, but I was surprised when I heard there was actually some sort of settlement, on the lines of the old-style village, in a cove on the seaward side, somewhere over the other shoulder of the flinty hill which was beginning to climb up the dark sky as we approached the shore.

Rort said there were about sixty people; fifty men and a few breeders, and they had a miserable existence growing vegetables on imported unsoured soil and fishing far out; cleansing and sterilizing conditions were fantastic, of course, but I gathered they

had worked out a satisfactory and safe system. Their rations were supplemented by the Central Committee at various times of the year, and I remembered seeing somewhere that the experiment was one likely to be encouraged in various places.

At all events they had welcomed the group and had been pathetically eager to provide labour and materials from their own scanty stores; they felt that the survey, even though organized only to carry out research on conditions, would improve their lot immediately, though there was something in their reasoning when looked at as a long-term policy. Research groups set up by the Central Committee were constantly on the move as the cloud moved round, and though we still got the same reaction, there were hopes in higher circles that the effects might wear off in our lifetime.

But most of this would not, of itself, have been enough to cause this uneasiness. It sprang from something other than the sombre environment into which every pulse of the boat's progress was bearing us. When I put this thought into the form of a direct statement Rort did not immediately reply. Then his tall body uncoiled itself from over the wheel.

"I don't know," he said. "But there's something deadly in the wind. You can laugh, but you haven't been here these weeks like the rest of us. Later, you'll know what I mean."

I was still chewing over this infuriatingly vague answer when we began the run into the jetty. The shingle was harsh, black clinker, something like volcanic ash, and the vessel grated unpleasantly against it as Rort let the water slowly take us in. He steadied the boat, holding a corroded handrail that jutted out from the concrete slipway, and after we had unloaded we pulled the craft farther up the shore.

Back from the beach the wind suddenly plucked at one, as

though it were buffeting down from the black bulk of the hill which rose into the misty dusk above us; we slipped and floundered on the yellow clay pathway that wound through black, slippery rocks, covered with sickly smelling encrustations, and once a shimmering, black and yellow creature like a toad flopped away soggily down the hillside, leaving a trail of crimson slime behind it.

I was winded long before we had reached the lower shoulder of the hill; the air seemed calmer here and looking down I could see the faint smudge of the launch beside the jetty and farther out, the tired, grey wrinkle of the sea, changing to the ghostly green glow it always assumed after dark. To my relief Rort suddenly turned aside from the pathway, and went through two sloping wet shoulders of stone that breasted across the face to the right.

Hesitantly I followed; it was an oppressive place, wet underfoot, the encrusted walls exuding moisture and overhead the sweep of rock toppling forward until it met in a dizzy arch. We were using our flashes now but presently the walls fell away, and we walked across an undulating upland slashed with the gentian, scarlet and black of the parasitical fungi that sometimes grew to two or three feet across. Along a gully and up another slope and then Rort halted. He pointed through a gap between groups of stunted trees. I was looking at K4 Research Station.

II

K4 had been constructed some two years before, at a time when the drive for economy and the need for a chain of observation stations had been at the height of conflict; the result was an amalgam of extravagances and sterilities. The Central Committee had felt that the scientific needs of establishments

overrode those of expediency and comfort so that at K4 primitive concrete constructions like the old-fashioned blockhouses had been left without proper proofing and finish, while the expensive and elaborate equipment housed within began to deteriorate for want of protection and proper maintenance.

The life there was a peculiar blend of crowded discomfort and brooding loneliness; the days were given over to exhaustive examination of the content of the soil, the air, and the sea surrounding the island, while the evenings were spent in writing up notebooks, in conducting analytical experiments among the crazy cackle of geiger counters in the tall, lighthouse-like building overlooking the rocky coast, and in limited social intercourse among our colleagues.

Of these some are worthy of more than passing mention: Dr. Fritzjof, a Swede who had lost an arm as a result of nuclear experiments; Masters, the Director of the station, a tall, handsome-looking man in his late forties with hair inclining to silver; sober, careful-minded, and good-humoured, a pleasant man to work with; Professor Lockspeiser, a young, tawny-bearded Australian who had done astonishing work on the degeneration of atomized structures and the causes of sterility in contaminated females; Pollock, despite his name, a West Indian physicist; and a breeder, officially C2147, but known to us as Karla.

A tall, blonde girl with a well-made body and prominent breasts and buttocks, she was ostensibly there as laboratory assistant, but really to be near Fitzwilliams, one of the physicists, by whom she was pregnant. This made no difference to the usual emergency regulations then in force and she was still expected to carry out her obligations to other members of the staff, which she did with energy. It was my turn to enjoy her on the third or fourth evening after my arrival and a very fine experience it was,

she being, as I said, a very passionate, well-built girl, most willing and inventive and with a most attractive smile and white teeth; Polish, I think. We all thought Fitzwilliams a lucky man as permanent possession of her was vested in him; he showed me the papers he had taken out on one occasion in which C2147 was specifically mentioned. I knew then it was correct as I had seen the same symbols, branded in the usual place for all breeders of her class.

If I record this in some detail it was because the monotony and aridity of the life made such occurrences assume the emotional and significant impact of a sunburst on a person blind from birth; it irradiated a glow that lasted for days and certainly Karla's presence and the amenities she afforded lent the little garrison some degree of contentment.

It was about a week after my arrival that the first of a long procession of events occurred, which were later to assume a quite disproportionate significance when they began to fall into place. It had been a day of storm and violence; shards of rain beat savagely at the transparent slits of the observation tower, almost drowning the discontented chatter of the instruments.

I had been out in the early afternoon, the weather abating, to draw off fluid from a particular form of fungi whose formation rather interested us, and when I turned up along the cliff, my cases full of specimens and cuttings, I was suddenly struck by the fact that since my arrival I had seen so little of the island. The clouds were still lowering and the harsh chumble of the sea on the slimy rocks did not form a background of any great charm, but a beam of sickly, dusty "sunlight"—an archaic term I use for want of a better word—suddenly pricked out a path to the sea's edge and against this metallic sheen I saw the filigree work of a pier and what looked like a cluster of huts and buildings.

I assumed this was the village Rort had spoken of and having some time in hand thought I would take a look, but an hour's stumble among foul rocks and dripping, cave-like formations along the shore made me realize that I could not hope to regain K4 before darkness. The afternoon was already deepening to early dusk when I came out on a primitive path and found myself near the spot. Though the greenish twilight and the slop of the waves among the pebbles of the foreshore gave the place a somewhat eerie aspect, I could not say I was particularly conscious of this, interested as I was to see the village.

I say village, but it was little more than the most primitive kind of settlement, framed in two gigantic spits of rock which made a sort of notch in the black sand. The wind had risen and the stench of decay was in the twilight. Dead matter and poisonous dribbles of spume whirled about the dark strand.

The green luminosity of the sea bathed the area in its pale, unearthly light though it had not yet assumed the intensity it would reveal with the coming of full darkness. I felt like a creature as unsubstantial as mist as I drifted, like a lost soul in a latter-day inferno. I was minded of a reproduction—on the vision-tube, of course—of an ancient illustration; one of the mimes on the celluloid strips I believe it was. It concerned the legend of the vampire and the scene depicted a man in a broad-brimmed hat and cloak wandering, much as I did tonight, through a landscape of mist and nightmare, to what strange adventure I never discovered, for the remainder of the strip was beyond preserving and some had been lost.

What did seem strange here was the lack of any life; a light, a figure, a footfall, an electric signal—anything would have broken that blank aridity. Now I was among the round, dome-like dwellings these people had improvised for themselves, and the

bulbous openings were, I hazarded, some form of double air-lock in which they would remove their polluted clothing before going inside.

I could not help thinking that they had made the best of their bleak conditions though; unless one were completely underground, there was very little difference where one lived on the surface of the world today. Having completed a circuit of the buildings without seeing any sign of life and the darkness now being almost total, I decided to return along the shore the way I had come. As I swung round, shifting my cases to my left hand to ease my cramped fingers, I was conscious out of the corner of my eye, of a blurred shadow that seemed to flit across the dim phosphorescence of the water and flicker behind a boulder.

I am not a particularly courageous man but my curiosity was aroused. I had come a long way to set eyes on the people of this place and though I did not want to disturb them in their houses—a formal visit would have taken up too much of my time that night—I would have liked to establish relations, preparatory to returning another day.

Among the boulders the atmosphere was foetid and the overhanging rocks and moss-like creepers made it dark. I soon began to regret my decision, but I had to go on as I could not now see properly to return and it was all uphill. The place appeared to be some sort of tunnel and I hoped it would lead towards the sea again.

Ahead of me there was a slight scratching noise that might have been metal-shod feet on rock, but I could not be certain. I paused to listen but the sound was not repeated. The place was beginning to get on my nerves. The walls were getting narrower and then the rocky, overhanging cliffs began to split into different

passages and alleyways which made consistent direction impossible.

This was confusing, but as I stopped again for breath I felt a faint stirring of the hairs on my spine as there was another furtive movement—this time behind me. Then there followed a noise that I didn't particularly like. It was a sort of slithering, scratching sound, and I had the unpleasant simile of a blind person spring suddenly into my mind. I was in a cleft of rock by the side of the track, a nasty place in which to be trapped, and there was little time to lose.

Whoever—or whatever it was, could barely be a dozen feet away. I ducked down and with a quick flash of wild fear slithered, as quietly as I could, out of the blind alley and round the next corner which was about six feet away. I paused a few feet back from the entrance of another gully; here at least, I had a clear line of retreat. Nothing happened for a few moments and I thought that perhaps my imagination had been too much.

But the tapping began again after a bit and now it was much nearer. A pause and more sounds, another pause then a few more steps. There was a long period of hesitation as the thing gained the entrance to the passage where I crouched with the flash I had hastily eased out of my hip-pocket.

It would serve both to see the creature I faced and also as a weapon if need be. As the seconds went past I resolved on a bold move. Without wasting any more time I gave a loud and somewhat quavery shout which sounded deafening in the confined, echoing space, sprang out into the main gully, and stabbed on my flashlight.

A great shadow crept across the rock, my scream was echoed by a high, shrill cry, even louder than mine, and I fell down in a

blind panic mixed up with some soft, yielding shape that blundered against me. The saviour of both was the flashlight which fortunately fell upwards, spreading its beams evenly and illuminating both faces. Which of us was the more frightened I cannot tell. It was a breeder from the village who had seen me prowling about and had come to investigate, at first thinking it was one of her own community.

We laughed in sickly relief and then she put me on the right road for home, glad of some company in those dark ravines. I was the first man of the outside world she had ever seen, and she was pathetically eager for knowledge; it was evident that she regarded the Central Committee and its scientific officers and other employees as the only hope for mankind, and she made me promise to visit the village again in the daylight and do what I could for its people.

This I readily agreed and noted down her number for future reference. Visits to the village and additional research here would give some variety to life on the island, and I was interested to see how these people made out in their hard and lonely struggle. This girl—she was little more than nineteen—was not unattractive but her hair was already going grey and she appeared to be suffering from debilitation. She stumbled many times along the track but always declined my assistance. When we gained the open shore again she was plainly exhausted and I stayed with her a bit after she had put me on my road; I offered to accompany her back to her people but she would not hear of this.

Her dark eyes seemed to have a world of experience in them and she was always looking first seaward and then over her shoulder, but I put this down to the strange environment and the hard life she led. As I waved her good-bye and set off along the

stony track, she called me back. The thin cry in the wind again caused me some uneasiness, I could not say why, and when I reached her the dark eyes were closed and the hollows under them seemed full of pain.

Then she beckoned and urged me towards the shore where the baleful light from the sea was beating on the dark sand and against the worn white boulders of the cove. I had told her of my qualifications coming down the ravine, but I could not at first grasp what she wanted of me. But in broken sentences she at last made me understand her needs.

Before I could stop her she had unbuttoned the smock-like overall she was wearing and stood stripped to the waist. I had seen many strange things in my thirty-five years and was inured to most sights that have become a commonplace of these times, but I could not resist an exclamation.

The girl had what would have been a magnificent figure under normal circumstances. But across her abdomen and over her breasts were only what I could describe as a mass of devilish green fungi; beneath it the skin glowed faintly luminous, cicatrized and crisscrossed with vein-like cuts and striations. The whole mass seemed to have a life of its own, independent of the girl's body, and I felt it must be a trick of the twilight when I saw the growth—I can call it nothing else—begin to stir and twitch, sluggishly at first, and then almost imperceptibly to expand, flowing outwards gently but inexorably, a fraction of an inch before it settled down to a slow pulsation—or was it the girl's own breathing?

Fear settled on me as I looked at this. I could do nothing for the wretched child then, but as she dressed I told her I would do what I could. I would bring medicines, instruments, the next time I

came . . . perhaps injections would help. She seemed infinitely relieved at this and clung to my arm for a moment as though I were her benefactor and she already cured.

She would not, or could not, tell me how she had contracted this malignant condition, but I gathered that hers was not the only case in the village. I was not disposed to linger; my encounter with the girl, the atmosphere of the island, and now this last shock had put a blight on my spirits, and I was eager to be off. As I went up the path I was almost inclined to break into a run. There was something else—something that defied analysis and yet gave me the greatest foreboding of all. For as I had crouched over the girl, attempting to diagnose something entirely outside my experience, there had been a strange perfume from her body.

I am, of course, familiar with the odours given off by the human body under various conditions of illness and decay, but I use the term perfume in its true sense. Whether it emanated from the girl herself or from the thing from which she suffered, I did not know. For a few moments, as I stood on that lonely shore, my mind was drenched with images; the drowned face of a girl I had once known, a melody playing somewhere long ago—something that I recalled as a treasured, recorded fragment of the past, on old archaic instruments by people playing together; what was it? Violins—that was it; violins and the perfume seemed somehow to symbolize all these things and above all the wild despair of regret.

But worst of all was the almost overmastering longing to reach the source of the perfume; there was wild delight in it and I caught myself, for one mad second, contemplating the frightful action of burying my mouth and face in the loathsome thing that was devouring the girl's body. Sanity came back like a blast of cold air as sand whipped by the night wind stung my eyes—and with it a black fear; I knew now what Rort meant. There was

something devilish about the island, something which as scientists we had to unravel. I knew also that I had to go back to the village and find out what it was.

But for the moment while the wind buffeted me as I breasted a spur of rock and came back off the foreshore to the preferable loneliness of the downlands that led to K4, I forgot the nostalgia and remembered only the sickly horror of that degenerate moment. Then black fear took possession of me and I was running, slipping, and sliding across the slimy turf to the comparative peace and sanctuary symbolized by the tiny spark that was the light of K4's observation tower, piercing the smoky darkness like a torch.

III

I am ashamed to say it was almost three weeks before I felt able to go back to the village, and even then it was in the early morning so that I should have time to return before nightfall. Much of the interval had been spent in research on obscure radiation conditions and my companions at K4 had not been as helpful as they might. The night I arrived back, panting, muddy, my cases lost down some pothole, there had been roars of laughter from the steadier-nerved, though I noticed Rort looked considerably pale as I told my story.

Fitzwilliams, a short, stocky figure was particularly humorous at my expense; his dark brown moustache seemed to bristle as he exploded with laughter and he pounded his fist on the table as he elaborated his ideas.

"By Future, this is rich," he spluttered—we had given up using the term "God" since the nature of creation had been discovered—and then went on to embellish his fancy with some bawdy and outrageous trimmings. I well remember the laughing

faces at the supper table that night; it was almost the last time that our little group had anything to be happy about, and that a feeble excuse at best. Looking back, I suppose it was ludicrous. I, a grown man, bounding across the slimy hillocks, completely out of control, my gear flying this way and that until I fetched up against the blockhouse entrance of K4.

That my first encounter with the girl was absurd, I was prepared to admit; my foolish fancies about the village and ravines; even my headlong flight. But the girl's condition was real enough; that was serious indeed and concerned us all if it were due to atmospheric conditions—and about that I was not prepared to laugh. I am afraid I got rather angry as the evening continued. But one man at least had not been amused.

“What do you think, Rort?” I asked.

His answer was a long time coming and when it did it was, for him, a strange one. He tapped nervously with his thin, tapering fingers, now stained and torn like most of our hands, and did not look at me directly.

“I prefer not to think—in this instance,” he said quietly and then got up and went quickly out of the bantering atmosphere of the mess-room.

I was wrong though, about one thing. There was one other man who took my story seriously. That was Commander Masters, the person most likely to be able to do something about it. He buzzed for me to go up to his private room two evenings later. I could relax with him; he was a man I liked and trusted. Immensely capable, Masters looked more distinguished, more serious than usual, as he faced me across the gleaming metallized surface of his desk, his dusty silver hair outlined against the warm glow of the wall lamps, so that he seemed to resemble one of those ancient “saints” I had seen in a printed book preserved in a museum.

"You think this could be some new mutation that we haven't come up against?" he asked. I shrugged. There might be much more to it than that.

"I don't know. I should have to make some pretty exhaustive tests on the girl to be able to come to any real conclusion. I'd like to have her up here so that we could make some proper lab checks, but that wouldn't be fair to the others."

Masters's eyes narrowed and he shifted uneasily in his chair. "Meaning. . . ?"

"Meaning that we don't know exactly what we're dealing with, sir. This condition—an unknown factor at the moment—may be peculiar to this one girl; it may or may not be malignant. Again, there's always the possibility it might be environmental or spread by contact."

"Hmm." Masters's nose wrinkled and he lay back in his chair, hands straight on the desk before him, and contemplated his nails for what seemed like minutes.

"What would you want in the way of gear and assistance to sort this out?"

"Little out of the ordinary. Laboratory facilities, of course; a few days uninterrupted study, someone to help me. This may be a false alarm, but it won't take long to establish the nature of the problem, one way or the other."

Masters straightened himself behind the desk. "Tell Fitzwilliams to give you everything you want from the lab. Make out the usual indent and credit the material to 'extracurricular investigation.' I don't know who you'll want to pair with you on the job."

He frowned again and consulted a panel inset into the desk which gave detailed breakdowns of each man on the station, with his duty rota, rest periods, and other information. He scanned rapidly down the columns, humming quietly to himself, while I

waited, my mind half absorbed by the problem that the girl had set, half ashamed by my panic flight of such a short while ago. I wondered if Masters was secretly amused by my adventure and whether he considered this little extra assignment a means of testing my efficiency under stress.

Probably nothing of the kind. He understood well the loneliness and occasional strangeness of our work in remote places; it was a more likely possibility that he had discounted the fiasco from the start and knew that absorption in my self-allotted task would outweigh any possible dangers that might present themselves.

"Yes. . . ." His fingers made calculations as he chopped at various names. "I can't spare Pollock"—and here he mentioned half a dozen names— ". . . that leaves you with Channing, Sinclair, and Rort. You'd better ask one of them if he wants a few days off."

Masters smiled briefly, for he knew as well as I that the trip might turn out unpleasantly. He stood up abruptly, with the swift, alert movements that often surprised his staff, and waved me to my feet with a suave but decisive gesture of the hand.

"Report to me before you go. And let me know if there's anything you need. If there is something down there we haven't seen before, we may not be able to help if we don't know what we're up against."

Reassuring words, that echoed in my mind long after I had gone back to my cabin.

IV

Fitzwilliams, of course, was frankly sceptical of the value of the whole business when I discussed the question of equipment with him; even the angle of the bristles in his moustache looked

derisive, but when he heard that it was a direct priority from Masters he changed his manner and became instantly helpful.

"What do you expect to find?" he asked, laughing, though there was the beginning of doubt in his eyes. That was a question they were all asking during the next twenty-four hours and indeed it was a question I did not really like to ask myself. Karla seemed to be the one person who had taken my story to an extreme; perhaps it was because she was a woman, but nevertheless my description of the unfortunate girl at the cove had filled her with an unnameable terror; and my earlier uneasiness returned a day or two afterwards when we were talking the situation over.

We were sitting in the observation tower, where I had just completed a tour of duty. Karla had been taking part in an experiment that afternoon, acting alternately as assistant and subject. As we were both free for an hour or two we stayed on in the tower, idly chatting, while our reliefs busied themselves as they took over.

We sat on steel-backed chairs in a bay of one of the observation ports looking out over a dreary waste of uplands, even more forlorn in the dusk, pricked out here and there with the steel reflection of a mere that gave back the purple-tinted cloud that served for sky. Farther out, the green phosphorescence of the sea glowed menacing and wearily as it always did at dusk.

Karla had been silent, her mind overborne by this now familiar scene, which affected each of us to a certain extent, even though we had been trained to check emotion. Now she put her hand on my arm and her eyes were dark and troubled.

"This girl . . . will she die?"

"I don't know." I spoke honestly, for who could say? She looked even more distraught and turned again to the green and purple vista outside the observation port. Swirls of mist were even

now heralding such a night as followed one after the other in this place.

"This is a dreadful spot," she said, and shuddered. Her remark surprised me, for she was an unusually steady and sober-minded girl whose position with the unit had been attained by those very qualities.

"Take care," she said, as we went down the stairway to our own quarters. "I have the strangest feeling that there is some harm in this for me."

She clutched my arm as she turned to go, and despite myself the expression in her face almost unnerved me for the fraction of a second.

Then I laughed: "Don't be silly," and gently pushed her towards the gallery leading to her own cabin. They were almost the last words on a serious topic Karla ever addressed to me but I had good cause to remember them, as later events will show.

To my relief Rort, whom I proposed to take along as my companion, was not only glad but even enthusiastic when I indicated my choice to him. His sombre face lit up at the thought of doing something more physically positive than the statistical work he was engaged on at that moment. For him, his manner was almost breathlessly hilarious as we checked over the instruments and other gear Masters's generous list had secured for us.

It had seemed to me the best plan not to base ourselves in the village but in a small observation post or blockhouse about two miles out, along the cliffs, so that we might make the best of ourselves in the event of any emergency. This commanded long stretches of jagged cliff in either direction and gave us an admirable control of the situation; for we could not be surprised, either by the villagers, by animals, or anything else.

Although the blockhouse, which we called No. 1 Post, was a

good distance from K4, we had wireless communication and behind it were undulating uplands which afforded us, for the most part, with an unimpeded retreat to base should we need it. Masters had some of the team carry stores and gear over for us a few days before we moved in, so that we would have an easy walk over the first day. We were to report night and morning, in between trips to the village. I did not know how long the investigation would take me, but I hoped that we would have the situation in hand inside a week.

Rort was more optimistic than I had seen him since my arrival at the island, but I put this down to the fact that we had our own small adventure to play. He was an introspective type and long laboratory sessions coupled with even longer sojourns in his own cabin had worked upon his nerves. So I was even more surprised when I saw him packing a murderous-looking flash-gun in its heavy composition case the night before our departure. It was an action that was to mean a great deal to our two-man party before many days were over.

V

A short while before Rort and I were due to move into No. 1 Post, I set off in the early morning to make contact with the village once more and prepare them for our arrival. It was a day of wild beauty with ragged cloud whirled by a boisterous wind over the downlands and far below the yellow spume of the oily breakers achieved a slow-motion spectacle that seemed almost poetic, divorced of the stench that polluted the foreshore when one arrived at closer quarters. I saw nothing in my solitary walk—nothing living that is—save for a large, hawk-like bird that plummeted downwards into the tangle of underbrush, an action followed by the chilling shriek of some unfortunate creature.

As matters turned out I did not have to go the whole way, for

on the rough track about a couple of miles from the village I met a gnarled man called McIver gathering pieces of wood which he was loading on a sort of primitive sledge. A wild, red-bearded man with staring eyes he was, and he turned out to be the leader of the local collective—headman it would have been in bygone times. When I explained what I wanted he was immediately cooperative. I told him about the girl and the possible dangers to the community, and he assured me that everything would be ready for our arrival at the end of the week.

Greatly excited and embarrassingly grateful for our offer of help, he would not stop for his wood but hurried back to the village as fast as his legs would carry him down the stony path. I retraced my steps to No. 1 Post to see that the provisioning was satisfactory. This was in a commanding position some little way inland but with a fine view in both directions along the coast from a stone and metal observation tower. Something unusual distracted my attention shortly after my arrival.

After a while spent putting some of my more personal kit in order, I thought I would go up the tower to see what the view was like and also to find out what we would need in the form of special gear. There was a nasty echo from the metallized stairplates as I went up the narrow passageway. Through the ports that let in a sickly light I could gradually see the winding, stony track that led away towards the west and then, eventually, the panoramic view both east and west along the rocky cliffs and beach.

This post had been carefully sited and provided a valuable link in the island's observation points. I had some trouble with the sliding door of the platform at the top as the fastenings had become corroded with time, but I was pleased to see that the equipment had suffered little, protected as it was by thick, transparent plating. It was a small chamber, the centre clear, the

circular walls lined with benches and machinery. The large, elongated ports had become obscured by salt sea-spume and would need cleaning, but even so it was an impressive view afforded. Towards the south-east, even with glasses I could not see K4, but it was reassuring to think that its tower was not far off beyond the ridged higher ground that sloped up from the marshes.

As I turned to go down again I became aware of a darkening of the sky towards the west and then saw that it was a large cluster of sea birds hovering at a point in the cove. I do not know what made me put the glasses to my eyes as such sights were common along here. As first I concentrated on the birds and then, lowering the lenses, I became aware that something on the foreshore was attracting their attention. It was a long way off, too far for me to make out any detail, even with glasses, and there were rocks in between but I had the vague impression that something was crawling across the blackness of the sand.

There was a small, sharply defined object that was outlined against the dull shimmer of the sea and then a greater mass which vaguely undulated; or it may have been a trick of the sea-shimmer. But the overall impression was faintly repellent and reminded me unpleasantly of the sheen I had noticed on the body of the girl.

The incident lasted only a moment because whatever it was flowed over behind a larger spur of rock, apparently impelled by the surge of the tide, and there remained only the birds. Uneasy, I went down the stairs and turned back towards the comforting reality of K4.

VI

I did not tell anyone at the station of my uneasiness, as I had already made something of a spectacle of myself, but I followed

Rort's example and made certain that my personal effects included my heaviest flash-gun. One or two of our colleagues still affected to smile at our little expedition, but the majority were more serious and, I think, half envious of the small independent command Rort and I had achieved.

Masters had us in for final instructions and I could not help reflecting that he must have supervised many such investigations as ours over the past few years—new mutations, fresh parasitic forms, strange debased creatures appearing round the coasts; these were the aftermath of radiation, each presenting him and many other research heads like him, with a new problem wherever encountered. Though it could never become just routine with him, his easy, genial manner concealed a complete lack of nerves; his was the kind of will and organizing brain it was comfortable to fall back upon and I was glad he was the directing force at K4.

Those on duty in the observation tower crowded to the windows to wave us off as Rort and I set out with our packs, and two or three of those off duty accompanied us for the first mile or so, before starting back with waves and an occasional joking remark. As we breasted the first rise after leaving base, I had given a last look behind and had seen Karla's white, anxious face staring towards us from the observation port of her own cabin. Her rigid attitude jarred oddly on my sensibilities and though I waved to her cheerily again and again, she never acknowledged the salute or made any flicker of recognition.

We walked in silence, both weighed down by the strange, indefinable atmosphere of the afternoon, weird even for this island and for these sombre circumstances. Rort was, I knew, content to leave the operational details of the "expedition" to myself, but he was a man who could be absolutely relied upon in

an emergency, for all his worrying, which was why I had chosen him. Again, he was a quiet companion which was a boon when two people had to be cramped up in close proximity for some time, as we would be at No. 1 Post.

We had to make a wide detour round the marshes which even now occasionally claimed a victim, though the villagers always avoided them whenever possible. The greenish, stagnant water exuded a strange, flickering miasma, which writhed purple, green, and red, forming a fiendish backdrop all the while our walk skirted them.

I planned a fortnight's stay as the maximum at No. 1, as fresh stores were then due and, like a child, I wished to be on hand when news and contact with a larger world would brighten K4 for a little while. Besides, the investigations should last only a few days. I could have the breeder up to the post for medical examination; I had her number and McIver was making all the other arrangements.

These and other thoughts, notably the increasing uneasiness of all at K4, linked with the personal fears of Karla and Rort, were filtering through my mind as we stumbled and slithered painfully across the rough ground rising from the marshes and came out onto the downs and eventually to the post.

All was as I had left it. The last of the stores had been stowed and the observation tower showed blind red and green eyes east and west into the darkening landscape as we came down the track towards it. I stopped by the entrance a moment longer as Rort went inside and looked once again across the wild landscape of jagged cliffs and pale green sea, which never failed to impress and awe me. There was nothing unusual in sight and no smoke or other indication of the village round the cove.

As I went in over the smooth flagged approach to the door

I slipped and only my hand on the metal guard rail saved me from a nasty fall. As it was I bumped the wall and grazed my shin. I swore loudly which brought Rort out. When I turned to see what had caused the mishap, I was surprised to observe little patches of jelly-like substance on the ground and then noticed that there were other traces of it; in fact the whole area was dotted with slimy fragments. I had not noticed them on my last visit and was puzzled to account for the phenomena. There was also an unusual smell hanging on the air—musty, choking, and putrescent. Rort's eyes narrowed when I pointed this out to him. He said nothing but looked keenly around in the gathering dusk and a quarter of an hour later went out with a portable flame-thrower and thoroughly scorched the area. The slime seemed to shrivel into spores which went dancing off to seaward in the wind which was now springing up.

Inside our own quarters all had been made clean and cheerful and a few minutes later I was on the transmitter to Masters. His calm voice out of the darkness, only a few miles away across the ridge, provided a comforting reality in our lonely situation and gave the necessary life-line we needed. I told him nothing but routine matters. In any case my thoughts made no sense even to myself and there was no point in putting doubts into his mind as to the advisability of letting me loose on my own.

When I had switched off the radio—we were to have a vision-tube link-up when Rort got the tower apparatus in working order—we ate a huge supper with an appetite born of our long walk. The wind, which had been rising steadily, began an unpleasant buffeting against the plate-glass ports. Our living room and bedrooms were on the second floor which was fairly high up, and the ground floor was given up to stores, a factor which was to have some importance later.

Soon afterwards Rort slipped quietly out and I heard the squeak on the metal treads of the staircase, though whether he went up or down I couldn't make out. There was a short pause and then a rasping noise as he shot the massive bolts of the main door which led into the post, an eminently sensible precaution which I should have thought of myself. Then he was in the room again, a wry smile on his face, which needed no explanation. After we had stowed the supper things, he unpacked and reassembled his flash-gun and carried it with him when he went up to look at the tower.

He whistled as he saw the state of some of the instruments and then rubbed at the observation panels so that we could see out into the palely green, writhing darkness before us. To the south and eastwards and westwards there was nothing but a misty blackness but the sea always had light, except when there was rain or thick fog.

There was obviously little we could do that night but we lingered up there in the eyrie, reluctant to go lower down. It was not only the wind, which was making ugly, fanciful noises as it roistered about the cliffs and the tower, but something in our minds, like a shadow vaguely seen out of the corner of one's eye, which made us uneasy and a prey to slight scalp crawl—another of the research man's occupational diseases. Though we strained our eyes seaward and landward we could see nothing. Eventually we went down at a late hour, brewed some coffee, and went to bed. We had an uneventful night and both slept well.

VII

The next morning was cold and Rort and I spent almost two hours getting the heating system working, nearly missing our early contact with K4 in our absorption. I was particularly

anxious to get the whole place up to scratch so that I could start on my work without delay; once we had achieved that I could leave routine matters to Rort; he had generously given up his own research projects in order to accompany me as general assistant, as he felt that a more active life for a week or two would do him good.

As for myself, I had been deeply impressed by the extraordinary condition of the breeder I had seen by the seashore; in all my experience I had never encountered anything like it and though the circumstances surrounding the episode were far from natural, I still had the feeling that there was some perfectly logical explanation, medical or environmental—possibly a combination of both.

We had a late breakfast and then went up to the tower to unsheath some of the instruments and inspect their general condition. They included a powerful telescope on a gyro-operated stand which I was particularly anxious to get into action. This would be most useful in both directions along the coast and its infrared twin in the same housing would help guard against surprise by night.

The landscape was normal when we looked out of the tower observation panels and there was nothing unusual; no movement except that of the sea and the flutter of an occasional bird. We did not get outside until almost midday and the door had remained bolted during that time. We then reconnoitred for a while along the rocky cliff path towards the eastwards in a region I had not seen before, but there was little of interest; the same rugged landscape, the same black sand and rocks, the same oily, sullen sea. It was almost an hour later when we returned and I was annoyed to see, as we made to enter the main door, a recurrence of the slime patches on the ground outside.

I made some comment to Rort and was about to go inside when he grasped my arm and brought me to a stop. I then saw a similar outbreak of the peculiar patches on the metal guard rail. The large door of the tower was of an old-fashioned pattern. It had been firmly secured by the authorities to guard against any incursion by the local inhabitants, but that special sealing had been removed when we took up our duties there.

Instead, the door was opened from the outside merely by a large metal ring operating a conventional latch. The door was now ajar. With an incredibly swift movement Rort's gun was unsheathed and in the aim position. I just had time to see that the metal ring was covered in slime before the panels went screaming back on their hinges at his kick and Rort had bounded over the sill. I followed, breathing fast, and our feet made a great deal of unnecessary noise as we took the metal stairs two at a time. There was nothing in the storeroom but more slime on the floor and similar patches on the treads.

The marks continued to the ramp outside the observation room and then ceased in a large patch on the floor, with the same sickening stench I had smelled before. There was no one—or rather I should say, nothing—in the tower and the other rooms were empty. I deliberately use the word nothing, because I think we both had a feeling that whatever came up those stairs was not human in the sense that we understood it.

We looked at one another and then Rort turned to the windows and gazed out across the bleak landscape of the island. He then stated something which I found difficult to dislodge from my mind for the rest of the day.

“Whatever it was,” he said, “could have seen us coming back and made its escape before we arrived.”

Lunch was an uneasy meal and the big door remained locked, though it was full daylight. . . .

VIII

It was early afternoon when we went down to the village. I felt we had spent enough time that day on restoration work and No. 1 Post was fully operational so far as my own sphere was concerned. We had neither of us said much about the happenings of the morning and Rort had carefully expunged the slime left by our visitor with a chemical solution. Neither had we informed K4 of the position by radio. There was no sense in raising an unnecessary alarm, and we could incorporate the information with our report of the day's doings during the evening call.

It was an interesting trip for us both. Rort had not been so far afield since arriving at the island, and I had not seen the village by daylight. It grew lighter or rather seemed to, as we came down the rough extent of track to that strange corner of land squeezed in between sky and sea. My eternal impression of this place was of the far off, long ago, extinct Eskimo villages that existed in former times; here again were the igloo dwellings domed, humped, and whorled, but instead of blocks of ice, concrete, presenting a ghastly, bleached effect from the constant action of the weather.

Here too were fungoid forms like fibroids overgrowing them and green, leprous stains that striated their surfaces into fantastic shapes. I supposed, correctly as it happened, that the government had erected these houses, for the technical problems involved were beyond the reach of these people. The domes were approached through a sliding metal door which led into a short corridor beyond which were two other doors, forming air-locks. Once inside, protective clothing was discarded and left in the last

chamber before the house proper, chemical action automatically cleansing the material.

I had expected some activity on the village track and in what passed for its streets, but once again the place seemed to be deserted. There were the screams of sea-birds, the chumble of the sea between the massive shoulders of rock that descended from the hills, and the yellow-green foam thundering up the black sand, but nothing more. We bore straight up the street for a large building that looked like a meeting place or village seat of government. The method of entry into this type of dwelling is by the conventional way—that is, by the insertion of a finger or any other obstruction into a metal slot alongside the door, which operates a solenoid and slides back the entrance.

The method is repeated, with variations, on the air-locks, except that these can be controlled from the inside and anyone in the interior can lock the doors by instrument control and prevent another person from entering. On this occasion we were unlucky; we were stopped at the entrance to the middle chamber but the telescreen over the second door, which was operating, showed us that the council chamber or conference room it depicted was empty. This meant that the occupants were away but had locked the doors. The method of gaining entry from the outside would be known only to them and we had no means of discovering the combination. It would be little use to us if we were inside, as we had come to see the people of the village and could make no investigations until we had spoken with them.

Rort said nothing as we came out from the main porch, but his eyes turned back to seawards and after a moment he pointed. Then I saw what had caught his attention. It seemed as though the entire population of the village had gone down to the beach.

There were small knots of figures clustered about the shore and others were spread out towards the eastwards, disappearing towards a cape which depended from the shoulder of black rock on the seaward side. The remainder of the villagers, if there were any more, were hidden from us by the shoulder of the hill.

As we skirted the shingle away from the village and gritted our way onto the sand, I wondered idly what had brought them all down there at that time of the afternoon. They were not fishing, that was certain, for many of their boats, ponderous metal affairs with painted numbers on their bows, were winched up towards the foreshore or riding heavily alongside the dusty red pier that contrasted so vividly with the glowing green and yellow of the sea.

It was this pier which first attracted my attention, as a great mass of people I now saw were striding up and down its length, some like ants upon the metal ladders that depended from the spindly legs into the water itself, while still more were busied about the boats. They did nothing with the cables which secured them but poked about under canvas covers or scuttled in and out of the doors of the larger craft. As we came closer we were unconsciously veering towards the east. The people had not been aware of our presence, but now some of them hastened forward with shrill cries of welcome and a few kept pace with us as we walked.

They were clustered more thickly along the foreshore here, among the black rocks between which the sea was riding sombrely with an awe-inspiring swell, and I could see still more men and women, with long hooked poles fishing about aimlessly in pools and among the rocks, sometimes sliding precariously about until they were arrested by a fissure or projection which

prevented them from falling into the water. The centre of attraction seemed to be a region of even darker sand and rock which compressed itself into a narrow wedge bounded by the sea on one side and an almost perpendicular wall of rock on the other.

Where one's eye looked for the narrow passage thus formed to end in the cliff face, instead there was a large curved archway of solid rock, perhaps a hundred feet wide, and the path of black sand, already beginning to be washed by the sea, veered away around a corner and disappeared towards the east. As though an invisible line had been drawn across the area, the groups of people from the village had halted about a quarter of a mile from the arch and were standing gazing intently across the sand. As we came up we could see that McIver and other village elders were the centre of the group and that they had evidently been directing the afternoon's activity.

There was, it must be said, something foreboding and repellent about this quarter of the shore, even more so than the remainder. A curious stench borne on the wind had little to do with the clean wholesomeness of salt and there were strange dragging marks in the sand at this point, stretching away towards the rock archway, which even as we watched were being quietly erased by the action of the water. I soon saw that this entire area must be submerged at high tide.

McIver came up as soon as he heard we had arrived and his large, sombre face looked worried. His red beard and wild eyes reminded me of some pagan god of the dawn of the world as he stood there in the grey light of that weird shore, surrounded by his people, many of whom were as fantastically dressed and outré in their appearance as he.

As Rort and I hurried towards him, McIver gestured towards

the great arch in the distance and his companions commenced to draw back a little, keeping pace with the rise of the tide. They seemed to take heart from our presence, though why I cannot say, as Rort and I were only mortal men like themselves; but to these poor souls we seemed armed with all the authority of the Central Committee and in those days the Committee represented law and hope for beings who had lived too long on the edge of the dark unknown.

McIver explained as we walked towards the tide-line; the village had been aroused because of the disappearance of one of the women. She had been traced as far as this wild shore. The area was a bad one and the people of the village kept away from it. McIver shook his head as we continued to question him; he feared the worst. The woman—she in fact was no more than a girl—had left trails in the sand. There were other things also; McIver preferred not to go into detail.

Rort and I soon saw what he meant. Across the sand, in bizarre and fantastic patterns, the girl's imprints—I would not say footsteps, as they were more like drag-marks—were accompanied on either side by great swathes of disturbed sand. I hesitate to be more fanciful than need be, but they resembled nothing so much as huge tracks such as a slug might make. The surface of the sand glittered dully in the light of the dying day and once again we saw traces of the nauseous jelly which had so disturbed us at No. 1 Post. The wind was rising and it cut to the bone as McIver, Rort, and I stood on the black sand and gazed towards the arch of the vast cave, whose entrance was aswirl with the incoming tide.

The tracks disappeared into the dark water. It was useless to follow and the place was such that I would have hesitated to enter with the Central Committee itself at my back. I already knew the

answer to the next question I put to McIver. Though I compared the breeder's number in my notebook with the one McIver gave me, I was not at all surprised to hear it was my girl—the one I had already met on the path in such dramatic fashion a short while earlier; who was afflicted with the curious green fungi; and on whose behalf we had really mounted the small expedition of Rort and myself to No. 1 Post.

I knew, as I looked towards the arch, that the secret of her disease had disappeared with her, most likely forever, and that apart from the humanitarian considerations involved, a promising line of research had been lost to us. Rort swore savagely when I told him and McIver's face was downcast. I gave him instructions to prepare the whole village for medical examination. I was anxious to check whether there were any further manifestations of this unusual disease among the inhabitants. In the meantime Rort and I had a manifest duty to radio K4 with our report immediately. I knew Masters would place great importance on this.

I warned McIver to make certain all in the village was secured at night and told him to place lookouts if that were at all possible. He promised, with a touching degree of faith in our omniscience, to carry out such precautions as we thought necessary. I asked him to send a man with us to collect a portable radio transmitter from No. 1, so that Rort and I could keep in touch with the village after dark. We all felt this to be a good idea; after two visits to the post by unknown intruders and now the disappearance of the girl, it was obvious that there was something gravely wrong on the island. McIver went off to give the necessary orders. After another look at the black mouth of that uninviting cave, Rort and I, together with one of the villagers, started back en route to our post. Though neither of us said anything about it, we both

wanted to get the heavily bolted door of the post behind us well before the advent of nightfall.

IX

For a long time that night I sat in the tower of No. 1 Post, looking out over the grey-greenish ocean whose glow seemed to symbolize the half-life in which the peoples of the world were living. Rort had radioed to K4 immediately on our return from the village and Masters had ordered a general watch kept throughout the night, both at our post and at the main station. According to Rort, the Commander had placed great importance on our information and was reacting with typical vigour. I could imagine the activity which was currently going on at K4. He had approved our action of supplying the village with a transmitter and McIver had already been through experimentally a quarter of an hour before.

There was nothing to report, but I had asked him to check with us three times a day in future. Rort was in the living quarters below, checking on the specialized equipment. I had the first watch, until midnight when Rort was to relieve me. Blown spume obscured the windows and the wind made a keening noise among the rusting antennae of the old post. Both Rort and I were thankful for the thick walls and heavy bolts on the main door. The traces of jelly-substance which our visitors had twice left behind them filled us both with a vague foreboding.

Though it was easy to become obsessed with sombre thoughts. This was why the Central Committee had decreed that research workers in the field, particularly in such spots as this, should be relieved after a year. Some of our colleagues at K4 would not be affected by such an atmosphere. I felt that Masters himself would

have been posted to Hell and have felt only scientific curiosity at the prospect.

And the Australian, Lockspeiser, was a tough character; unimaginative and strong-minded, he could have worked at K4 for years without knowing such a word as "atmosphere." Fritzjof too was a man to be relied upon. The others I was not so certain about. And though Rort's nerves were not all they should be—he had gone through experiences enough to shake the strongest over the past few years—there were few companions I would have rather been with in a tight corner.

With these reflections and others, I drank the coffee Rort had left me and then, lulled by the faint rustle of the gusting wind round the tower, I must have dozed for a few minutes. When I awoke it was just before eleven. I rose yawning, for I had certain instrument checks to make. I went out onto the rusted steel platform which airily circled the tower, in the manner of an old-fashioned lighthouse. We had some trouble with the sliding door some days previously but now it had been greased and moved back smoothly beneath my hands.

I stood looking idly at the green sea reflected on the underside of the dark, louring clouds; green sky and green sea made a fantastic sight for those experiencing the phenomena for the first time, but these were old scenes for such workers as ourselves and I was watching for other signs. I made a few notes, checked the instrument levels on the delicately calibrated machines in their lead-lined boxes on the windy perch, and withdrew into the central chamber. I relocked the door. This undoubtedly saved my life.

It was just a quarter past eleven when the slithering began. I could hear it even above the faint mumble of the surf and the

echoing sigh of the wind. The noise resembled an unpleasant suction process; swamp water boiled in it and blown spume and a nauseous tang like corruption on the high wind. And with the rotting perfume, which I had smelled before, freedom of action returned to me. I picked up my flash-gun and buzzed for Rort. He had already heard the sounds too.

"Main doors secure!" he yelled and then I heard his feet pounding on the metal-plated stairs. Something screamed from outside, freezing blood and bone, inhibiting action, paralyzing the will. A girl's face grew at the window, distorted; it gazed in at us fearfully, hair streaming in the wind. The thing was an impossibility; we were more than forty feet from the ground—unless she could scale perpendicular walls, wet with sea-spray, in semidarkness. I recognized the girl I had met on the cliff-path, the girl we had supposed sea-drowned in the cave.

She screamed again and as Rort flung himself to the outer platform door, I pinioned his arms; we struggled silently and the air was filled with a sickly, nauseous perfume. Something like squid-ink purpled the thick plate-glass of the outer ports; suckers waved hideously in the night. A face like an old sponge, oozing corruption, looked in at us; the girl disappeared.

"Great Future!" Rort swore. He sprang to the rocket lever and bright stars of fire burst over the tower, bringing writhing daylight to the ground below, where vast forms slithered and slid and shuddered worm-like. Rort screamed like a woman then and we both made for the stairs. On the ground floor, the great door was already bulging inwards. The smell of corruption flowed under the panels. Sanity returned in this extremity; wood roasted, metal burned white-hot, and the gelid mass mewed like a cat as Rort fried the door with his flash-gun.

Sinews cracking, we levered casks, metal boxes, anything with

weight into the gap cut in the door, avoiding the mewling, dying thing which dabbled beyond the threshold. I seized a coil of rope. Upstairs, in the central tower, plate-glass shattered like doomsday. Instruments fell to the ground with a clatter. Rort at the stairhead blasted fire into the central chamber. Again the bleating cries, the nauseous stench repeated. I opened a casemate on the landward side, secured the rope, hurled it into the dying darkness. I prayed none of the creatures were on this side. I called to Rort, walked down the wall on the rope, flash-gun cocked. Something shuffled, the bushes whispered in the wind. Chaos in the tower and at the central door. Rort joined me; he was crying under his breath. His flame-gun made a bloody arc through the bushes and something scuttered with a squamous step. Then we were clear of the bushes, running strong, slithering and falling and leaping again until we were splashing into the less frightening terror of the swamp.

Rort was sobbing. "By Future!" he panted. "Did you see their eyes, man? Did you see their eyes?"

Blinded by sweat, elbows tucked into my side, I had no breath left to answer. With straining lungs we flew onwards to the safety of K4.

X

Masters looked grim. Once again the silver of the lamplight on his hair reminded me of a long-gone saint. Those not on watch by the heavy-duty radiation-units sat in a semicircle and listened to his instructions. There were about a dozen of us and we had absorbed what he had to say with the utmost attention for we all knew our lives most probably depended on it. McIver had been warned; the Central Committee alerted. But we could depend on no help from outside.

Masters had questioned Rort and myself minutely, both when we had made our first somewhat incoherent reports in the privacy of his office, and then in general conference.

“What creatures could scale walls like that and still have weight to break down such doors?” asked Fitzwilliams, with that mocking touch of scepticism which I found so exasperating. It was the fourth time he had asked the question in the last hour. Rort turned a flushed face to him. Anger trembled in his voice.

“Would you care to go out there now and find out for yourself?” he asked quietly.

Fitzwilliams blew out the air from his lungs with a loud noise in the silence of the conference room. His eyes appeared suddenly uneasy. He looked away awkwardly and said nothing.

“Matters in hand, gentlemen,” said Masters succinctly. Everyone gave him attention.

“Nature of creatures, unknown. Appearance of girl at window; physical impossibility under normal circumstances. Circumstances not normal. We’ll leave that for the moment. Possible source of emanations; cave near the village. Correct?”

He inclined his head towards me. I nodded. Masters got up and went over to the duty chart.

“General situation: emergency, lady and gentlemen”—the use of the female singular was a courtesy due to Karla’s presence. “So far as we can tell K4 is immune from any possible attack. Two first priorities. The manning of No. 1 and No. 2 posts by adequate force. This means equipping with heavy radiation-units. Two: the investigation, tracking down, and destruction of these creatures. Now, I want to see you and Rort again, when this conference is over.”

The meeting continued in Masters’s brisk, inimitable manner. Rort and I, sitting facing the Commander in the bright lamplight,

felt the first comfort since we had emerged from the depths of the swamp the previous night.

XI

Nothing happened for a week. Rort and I were among the strong party which had reconnoitred No. 1 Post the following morning. The burst door and windows, the smashed instruments, above all certain remains among the debris were enough to silence the strongest doubters. I noticed, maliciously, that Fitzwilliams had not volunteered to accompany the party.

A tractor vehicle with a heavy radiation-unit mounted on it, led the way. With the power available, this would be enough to deal with any known dangers. Fritzjof, who had volunteered to head the manning of No. 1 under the changed circumstances, led the party. He seemed as disappointed as Rort and myself at the lack of any tangible evidence on the nature of our visitors. There was the stench, it is true, and traces of jelly on the stairs, in front of the door and in the upper chamber. But of the creatures which Rort had certainly destroyed, there was not so much as a fragment of bone or a sliver of hide.

Part of the problem was solved by careful examination of the walls of the tower. They had been scaled by some form of suction. Fritzjof smoked his pipe silently and pondered this; the grey light of the cliff-top seemed to flicker across his strong, square face. His empty sleeve, pinned to the front of his leather jacket, flapped in the wind.

He grunted. "Flying octopuses, that's what we're dealing with," he said jocularly. He strode confidently into the tower. His remark broke the tension and the remainder of the party followed in a relaxed atmosphere.

The next few days were occupied in putting things in order at the two posts and certain precautions were also taken in the village. No. 2 Post was on the far side of the island, on a point commanding all directions, both inland and to the seaward side. Masters felt it imperative to get both posts in full working trim; we did not know what we might have to face and early warning was necessary, especially if K4 itself were attacked.

Masters held another conference a few days afterwards, when he asked for volunteers to man the forward posts. I am ashamed to say so, but both Rort and I were relieved when Masters decided to second us to duties at K4. He felt that we had done our share and it was perhaps cowardice on our part to agree with him, but there was much sense in what he said; our nerves had been strained almost beyond endurance and we might perhaps have been weak links in a chain of new and untried personnel.

Masters had decided to detail four people for each post, which would leave twelve for K4, an adequate margin. Each post had two radio links and they were to report at regular intervals. The heavy radiation-units commanded the main doors and if necessary the parties could escape mounted on the tractor vehicles. Needless to say, each party member was heavily armed. Two flash-guns at least were to be mounted on the outer platforms of the towers to repel any attempt at invasion by the things, and powerful floodlights encircled the buildings.

The damaged equipment was repaired and after a while Masters expressed himself satisfied that everything possible had been done to ensure the safety of the personnel and the success of the arrangements. McIver's people were keeping watch near the cave entrance in daylight hours, but they had reported nothing. This did not mean that the things were not at large on the island; if they could swim—and there was no reason to believe they could

not—they might well make their way to and from their lair unobserved at high tide, when most of the cave area was submerged.

Lockspeiser was to command No. 2 and Karla had volunteered for No. 1, much to my surprise; this in turn had changed to astonishment when Masters had agreed without demur. But then I thought things over and saw the sense of the arrangements; Karla was as expert as a man with flash-gun or radiation-unit and was quite without fear; these were the things which would count at the forward posts, whereas those with high scientific qualifications would be needed for the more exacting work at K4 and as post commanders.

The week passed quickly, in a feverish chaos of work, calculations, and hard physical labour. Masters inspected both posts and expressed himself satisfied; the radio links were tested. Early on a grey afternoon of wind-scoured sky the two groups marched out in opposite directions; it was a brave little show, though pitiful enough under the circumstances, and one or two of the hardier spirits raised a ragged cheer to encourage them on their way.

Rort and I sat in the main instrument chamber of K4 at the power telescopes and saw No. 2 party out of sight. Then we changed round to the other side. Fritzjof's small expedition were but faint dots on the high uplands now, Karla walking behind. Then a dip hid them from view. Rort and I did not know that we had seen our colleagues for the last time.

XII

I woke out of a dreamless sleep to find alarm bells ringing through the corridors of K4. The lights in the room where Rort and I were

sleeping had come on automatically and it was only a moment or two before we had drawn on our night-duty overalls and were on our way to the main Control Room. Though there were only a dozen people left in the headquarters building it felt like a fort manned by thousands of men, as footsteps echoed, magnified, and distorted along the metal corridors.

Masters was already at the infrared periscope in the Control Dome, with Fitzwilliams operating the scanner. Rort and I sat in front of our own instrument panels and switched on.

"No. 2 Post reports Condition Normal," said Rort after a moment or two.

"McIver reports Condition Normal," I called out to Masters.

The night air was heavy with static and distorted human voices as technician after technician made his Condition Normal report. The operators of the heavy radiation-units, on the galleries above, overlooking the outer air; the men at the radar and other instrument panels; even those on visual lookout with flash-guns, all had their individual reports to make. A red light flashed on a control panel the other side of the Control Dome, indicating an abnormal state of affairs. Someone had failed to answer.

"No. 1 Post not replying," said the operator.

Rort and I exchanged tense glances.

"Radio failure?" someone conjectured aloud, hopefully.

"Both sets?" replied Masters succinctly, his voice muffled from the Dome. No one replied. The uneasy silence was broken by the faint hum of the instruments.

The man at the No. 1 Post panel consulted a time capsule.

"Nearly half an hour overdue in reporting," he said.

Nothing happened throughout the long night. Negative reports from stations operating; silence from No. 1 Post. It continued like this until dawn.

When daylight broke, misty and sulphurous, Masters had already made his plans. He personally led the four-man party, which included Rort and myself, out of K4. He had concluded, after some thought, that there was little danger during daylight as the creatures which had attacked No. 1 on the previous occasion had never been seen during the light hours. And if they inhabited the cave area on the shore by the village, their irruption into the world of men may have been governed in some way by the tides. But the overmastering desire of everyone at the moment was to discover the reason for the radio silence at No. 1.

We had not long to wait. No. 1 Post was a deserted shell. The remains of the door hung askew on its hinges as Rort and I had left it; the radiation-unit had been overturned but not damaged. The instruments and equipment of the post had been left intact. But of our colleagues there was no sign. Masters sniffed the air with distasteful curiosity. Once again that sickly sweet pungency polluted the atmosphere. Footsteps clattered on the metal stairs as the party searched the building. All they found was the clothing of our companions; it was soaked in the jelly-substance.

I walked over to the window at the top of the tower and looked out at the grey, sullen sea; of all the places in the world this was one for which I would always feel a high priority of hatred. As I moved to come away my foot kicked against something. I bent down and using the tongs supplied picked up something small and black. It was Fritzjof's official logbook.

Back at K4 that evening Masters buzzed for me at about half-past seven. I had sterilized the logbook in accordance with standing instructions and I took it in to his office with me. Matters rested as they had the previous night; K4 was at emergency and hourly reports came through from No. 2 and from McIver normally.

The book made curious reading but Fritzjof's devotion to the cause of science combined with his iron nerve did much to explain the nature of the phenomena with which we were faced. The first entries for the previous night were normal and dealt merely with technical matters. For reasons which later became obvious there was a long blank and then Fritzjof's next entry in the journal was timed 11.50 P.M.

It read: "We have been under attack. At 10.02 precisely Fitzwilliams reported unusual disturbances around the tower. I at once activated the floodlights and rocket flares. At the same moment the main door of the post came under attack from some beings I shall attempt to describe later. Mazel immediately brought the radiation-unit into play, with some success. As soon as I saw that things were under control on the ground floor I hurried to the radio console but before I could establish contact with K4 was called at once to the tower, where Fitzwilliams and Karla were engaged with flare guns. There appeared to be dozens of invertebrate creatures of the octopus family attacking the post.

"They are immensely tall and armed with three long antennae equipped with suckers, on each side of what I will call the body, for want of a better word. Eyes or centres of intelligence, I can see none. But a hit at the top of the body where a man's head would normally be seems to affect the brain area. I am alarmed at our position for still more of them are gathering round the tower. Morale good.

"12.15. Another attack has been beaten off but I cannot get back to the radio console. There is a strange perfume coming up the stairs. The radiation-unit has ceased firing. Mazel cried out once but we have not been able to see what has happened. I have to stay here to defend the staircase. The tower has been under

attack again. Fitzwilliams and Karla are handling themselves well.

“Later—01.00 I think. The incredible has happened. I am now alone. I am not afraid but I wish K4 to know the truth. At about half-past twelve I detected a nauseous odour coming from the top of the tower and then my two colleagues called out. I was able to distinguish that the creatures had squirted something over them. I looked from the window and saw one of the great masses eject some form of dark ink from a sac at the top of the body, much as a squid does when disturbed. I could not believe what I next saw. Karla and Fitzwilliams, who had dropped their ray-guns, were forced to divest themselves of their clothes. The creature’s sac then discharged again; the perfume had an incredible effect on my two companions. I was not able, myself, to detect it on this occasion.

“Its function was apparently to attract them. Both walked to the edge of the railing and were absorbed in the jelly-like substance of the creature’s body. Their faces were happy!

“01.56. I may be mad but I do not think so. My colleagues have not died but have been swallowed, for want of a better word, as still-living organisms! On the evidence of tonight and of what we have discussed earlier at K4, I believe them eventually to become similar organisms themselves . . . Warn Masters. the cave area must be destroyed . . . the only way.

“Later. I am not sure of the time. Great Future help me. The things are at the window again . . . I must go . . . there is a nauseous stench.

“02.05. Not long now . . . back again . . . masks the only ans [a passage was then illegible] . . . Imperative . . . tell Masters. . . .”

The logbook ended there. The Commander turned a tight-lipped face to me.

He voiced the thought finally. "This hardly seems possible."

"I agree," I said. "But Fritzjof's report seems incontrovertible. And there is this further evidence."

I passed over to him something which I had picked up from the floor of No. 1 Post. It had been embedded in congealed jelly and after the labs had carried out the usual cleansing tests it had been turned over to me.

It was a piece of circular discoloured metal, pitted and marked with green and yellow stains. It was my opinion that it formed part of an old-fashioned wristwatch, such as people used in the last century to denote the passing of time.

An inscription on the back read: CHARLES EVINRUDE. 1995.

"You really believe what you have written in your report?" said Masters. He was neither disbelieving nor believing, merely sifting facts.

I nodded. "It would explain the reappearance of the face of the missing girl from the village at the post window. It's my belief that people are 'digested' by these creatures, as Fritzjof described, and themselves become similar living organisms, revolting as this idea may seem to us. This wristwatch was worn by one of the creatures killed by the radiation-unit. After death the whole thing dissolved away."

Masters looked out of the port at the writhing green sky beyond.

"And Fritzjof and his colleagues are somewhere alive out there," he said simply, but with great weight. "It barely seems possible that in three generations, human beings should degenerate to that."

“The effect of radiation on humans long exposed to it, is largely unknown, sir,” I said. “With long inbreeding and. . . .”

Masters cut me short. His face was still pale.

“Fritzjof is right,” he said crisply, his old manner returning. “We must make preparations at once to destroy these creatures in their lair.”

He smiled in a strained manner. “And we shall take advantage of Fritzjof’s forethought. What he was trying to tell us at the end of the log was, ‘Masks the only answer.’ A sensible precaution against the perfume ejected by these beings. See to it at once.”

XIII

The box-shaped, square-bowed boat thundered in the surf, sending a shower of greenish, phosphorescent spray cascading down the metal decking. I found it difficult to breathe in the ponderous mask, and clutched the flash-gun to my side while I steadied myself with my other hand. The cave entrance before us grew ominously large, danced in mocking circles with the movement of the boat, receded briefly with the surge of the tide, and then grew again as the motor urged the unwieldy craft onwards.

Rort, unfamiliar in the black rubber suit which fitted him like a sheath, nodded reassuringly. One hand tapped lightly on the transparency of my facepiece as though to impart confidence. I glanced to left and right. There were six boats in our small invasion fleet; dawn burnt smokily across the green-yellow surge of water, bathed the black sand. I could see Masters in the bows of the nearest vessel; somewhere a radio speaker crackled unintelligibly. The canvas-sheathed stub of a radiation-unit poked from

the bow of the nearest craft on my left, like the horn of a cow I had once seen depicted in a book.

Upwards, on the slopes of cliff were the minute figures of McIver's men; they were waiting for the rocket-flare which was to signal the part they had been assigned. There were more than eighty people engaged in this all-out assault effort, almost every person on the island; even the women had been pressed into service, though few except the most able-bodied had been assigned the boats. Most made up the cliff force where they would be of the greatest use, with little danger to themselves.

McIver himself was assisting Masters; his must be the bulky figure I could see just behind the Commander. He wore some strange rig-out of his own, but topped by the mask and special equipment supplied by K4, looked just as individual as he always did. The strength of the current was very fierce here and the helmsman had anxious moments as we passed a belt of ragged rocks closing the entrance. Masters had deliberately chosen dawn and high tide for the assault. The tide had in fact turned and had been an hour on the ebb.

This way the assault party could be delivered to the very cave entrance, dawn affording the element of surprise. Masters had also argued that in the event of things going wrong it would be quicker and easier for the force to withdraw on the ebb. Later, if it became necessary we could stand off in good order across the sand at low tide. The radiation-units were to be debarked on the wings of the landing area to command the cave entrance, in case the creatures surprised the first wave before they were properly ashore.

Rort and myself were among those detailed to cover the landing of the heavy units by going ashore first to hold the beach. The sea slapped heavily on the sides of the big fishing boat and spume

whipped by a needle-sharp wind blew over the fleet as we came inshore. Fortunately the prevailing wind was blowing off the beach which would mask the sound of the engines. We had no means of knowing whether these mollusc-like beings were able to hear in the human sense, but Masters, with his usual tactical reasoning, had decided not to take any unnecessary risk.

Rort's hand was on my shoulder and the helmsman's shout came a split second later as the boat bottom grated on the harsh black sand. The outlines of the beach and cliffs loomed more clearly out of the faint morning mist. Then Rort and I were over the side. The coldness of the water met us with a shock, but it was not more than three feet deep and we splashed wildly ashore, followed by two of the villagers. The small party went flat on the sand, flash-guns at the ready and pointed towards the cave. All along the beach the unwieldy fishing boats were splashing heavily through the shallows, minute figures, black against the green shimmer of the surf, detaching themselves from the craft and merging into the blackness of the sand.

We fanned out in a semicircle to protect the radiation-unit on our left which was just coming ashore, the tractor inching it down the ramp. The beach seemed alive with figures though we were in reality a modest task-force for the situation with which we were faced. I glanced from the cave back to our right and could see the other big weapons coming off the ramps. So far all had gone well and we were excellently placed to deliver attacks. The scheme was that once the radiation-units were well established, the advance parties would rendezvous near the cave entrance in order to pen up whatever creatures were within; this would ensure maximum slaughter with a minimum of danger to those on foot.

The big units would deal with any creatures which broke

through the cordon and then, when they had been moved forward, would liquidate everything within the cavern. Or at least that was the scheme. I saw Masters in the middle of the groups on the beach and then his hand went up. I hurried along the shore towards him and the unit leaders from the six boats debouched from their groups at the same time. Masters drew everyone off to the right, where we were concealed by a hump of sea-drenched rock, while he held his briefing.

His instructions were, as always, succinct and to the point. Each of us knew what to do; everything within the cavern was to be destroyed, no matter what we might feel about the semihuman aspect of these creatures. Under no circumstances were face masks to be removed. Masters waved us off peremptorily and we all thudded back along the beach to take up position. The radiation-units were now ashore and in situ, the gunners hunched over the control panels on the heavy metal-railed platforms. They waved to Masters as a check. Rort and the other two men with us scrambled to their feet as I approached. I looked back. The cave entrance was menacing and blank in the cold light of dawn. Then the electric klaxon on one of the fishing boats sounded off. Masters waved us forward and twenty-four pairs of feet were gritting up the sand into the unknown.

XIV

There was a silence after the klaxon sounded and then a confused murmur down at the beach. One of the radiation-units shot pink flame and the sea boiled at our backs. Something mewed with a heart-chilling intensity we had experienced before. Rort spun on his heel. We were almost at the cave entrance now and vast shapes were stirring on the black sand. Down on the beach a huge

form which had emerged from the sea was staining the green water in its death agonies. This was something no one could have foreseen. The things were returning to their lair after a night spent on land.

I saw the radiation-units swivel to cover the seaward side of the landing area, and Masters gesticulate as he mustered a force to repel this menace at our rear. The sea boiled again and several monstrous humps began to emerge, but we had no time to watch them. There were about a dozen of us within reach of the cave and it was obvious that we should have to deal with the things until such time as the main force could be deployed.

Rort's flash-gun erupted, and sand and gravel at the cave entrance glowed with heat; we were almost within the arch now. I was thankful for the mask when I saw the abominations which were stirring within. A humped form reared in the dying light and then others and yet others beyond. Rort fired again and again and then we were within the cave; our companions followed and jets of flame turned the vast cavern into which the advance was penetrating, into a lurid scene from hell.

Again the mewling cries and purple ink shot across in a wide arc, staining the dank sea walls. A grey, wrinkled form which seemed to detach itself from the background, a vague, amorphous shape ascended from the depths of the pit, stirred in front of me. Three long, whip-like antennae with whitish suckers thrashed the sand; the skin was glowing with soft inner fire and shimmered and sparkled in the light as though coated with mucus. Low mewling calls emanated from the mass like the sensuous purrs of a cat; the rounded hump at the top of the structure was bisected by a long slit which opened and closed as though taking in air.

Someone knelt at my elbow and fired a flare into the interior; the star-burst revealed a cavern of the proportions of a cathedral

leading away into Future knew what unspeakable depths. The great mass in front of me swayed and pulsated and purple ink drenched our small group. I wiped my mask clear and saw Rort spraying fire into other forms beyond. I felt sick at heart for, as the great form had turned, I saw what appeared to be a human shape down within the jelly. A moment of madness then which turned to sick loathing and horror.

Cleansing flame burned from the jet of my gun into the heart of the abortion before me and the mewling changed into eldritch screams; the mass crumpled before my eyes, disintegrated in black oily smoke and flame. I fired again and again until the sickness and horror were dispersed in healing fire and nothing was left on the dark sand but minute lumps of jelly which dispersed in the rising wind.

More of the creatures appeared from the tunnels which now opened up before us; they moved with alarming speed and the antennae which had formerly been lethargic and leisurely in their movements now sliced the air like whips so that one had to exercise extreme caution. A man on my right screamed suddenly and I turned to find two of the antennae about him; one round the waist, the other pinioning his arm. His flame-gun clattered to the rock floor and he was drawn inexorably towards the pulsating mass of jelly. Rort then blotted out man and jelly in a white-hot spirt of merciful fire.

The cries had changed their note to that of alarm and anger; the air was filled with smoke through which we groped with difficulty. Bodies blundered against me in the murk and there was real danger that my companions might mistake each other for the creatures, with fatal results. The very floor of the rock cathedral seemed to tremble at the ponderous tread of these viscous monsters.

We stopped, fired, paused to strain our eyes through the fog of smoke; moved on, fired again in a nightmare of noise and high-pitched cries. A mass of the creatures were blocked in a narrow part of the tunnel ahead of us; it was a dangerous place. They were baffled at the failure of their previously successful tactics and I knew that if we were drawn into that place within reach of their antennae, the dangers were incalculable.

I waved my nearest companions back and then turned, on hearing an agonized cry; it was Rort. His beard bristled in the light of the dying flares and I saw that he had somehow fallen so that his mask had been knocked aside. Purple ink from the creatures' sacs drenched his clothing; he threw away the flash-gun, held his hands wide, and marched towards the creatures, whose tentacles reached out to embrace him. I saw his face just before the flares died; it was something I had to live with for the rest of my life. It was radiant with happiness as the gelid mass closed over it.

I performed the same mercy for Rort then as I should myself have been grateful for. Discharge after discharge of purifying flame reduced my old friend to cinders and incinerated with him the pulsating excrescence that was devouring him alive. Sickened then, we fell back in the smoke and flame as the note of a klaxon pierced the depth of the cavern. The eight or nine survivors of our bloody sortie regained the open beach to full daylight.

The remaining monsters from the sea were being slaughtered in the shallows as Masters's inexorable ring of attackers closed round them. It was evident that we had gained the day here, but at our warning cries our rearmost companions faced about to find a solid wave of grey, fungoid beings pouring out of the cave onto the sand. I tripped on the soft beach and caught myself against a rock; pain stabbed through my side and the daylight faded before

my eyes. Strong hands sustained me as a radiation-unit fried a mass of squirming creatures jammed in the cave entrance. A rocket burned then against the sky and as jet after jet of flame convulsed the fungoids that vainly tried to make their way over the black sand, the watchers on the headland detonated the explosive charges laid two days before and brought the whole of the cliffside down on the cave of horror, blotting out the creatures from the sight of man forever. I fainted as I was being carried to the boat and when I regained my senses briefly, saw that sinister shoreline recede for the last time.

XV

All that was long ago and is now the distant history of these awful times in which we live. What the vision-tube commentators and news bulletin readers called the invasion of the Flabby Men lasted but a brief period, but for that time the future of the world and with it that of humankind trembled in the balance. For the irruption into the world of men of the debased creatures who had taken so many of our companions, was not confined to our island alone. It was part of a large-scale general invasion by these creatures along many parts of the coast and it was only through the mustering of volunteer forces and extreme efforts by the Central Committee, that the attempt was defeated.

But many died and the campaigns lasted many months before the creatures which had ascended from the sea and from the depths of sea-caves were annihilated or driven back to whence they came. And who knows whether their survivors, possibly breeding at a fearful rate, may not yet mount another, more successful attack upon the last bastions of mankind? How they came, how they lived and bred, and why they took our com-

panions we were never able to discover. In death they returned to a state of liquescence which defied the analysis of our laboratories. And what intelligence animated them and how they were able to communicate over long distances in order to synchronize their attacks upon the whole of our coastline—that again was beyond the analysis of our finest scientists and scholars.

Years have come and rolled away again; I am a senior administrator now, wise and calm after decades of decision and strife, but my sleep is still troubled by remembrance of my companions.

Fritzjof and Karla and Rort, my old friend, are those I particularly remember, of course, and the terrible and inexplicable manner of their going. It was many weeks and only a few days before I left the island forever, that I was able to piece together an overall picture of the chaos the Flabby Men had wrought upon our flimsy and ill-founded civilization. And even today, when the cloud still hangs over the earth, and radiation sickness and mutations are still with us, I find it difficult to blot out the final horror of the scenes we witnessed on that beach and in that cave.

It was found that I had two cracked ribs on my return to K4; long after the battle was over and the expedition had returned to headquarters, I lay ill with some sort of fever. I was not up for more than two weeks and it was another two still before I felt something of my old self again. I sat once more in Masters's office and answered questions put by that kindly and most resolute of men. We often discussed the implications of what was perhaps the strangest adventure that ever befell mankind, but we were never able to arrive at any logical answer. Perhaps it is better so. An odd conclusion, perhaps, for a scientist, but the result may be more acceptable for the world's peace of mind.

It was not until my last night at K4 that I told Masters what I

had seen in the cave. The relief boat was coming back to pick me up the following day and I was to have the company of others on my return journey to the capital, where I was to stay for the next year, to allow my shattered nerves a chance to recover. The faint luminosity of the sea stirred uneasily, greenish-grey outside the great plated windows of the Commander's office, and blown spume dribbled across the glass in the light wind.

For in my last burst of anger and horror, in the dying flare I had seen, just before I killed the jelly-creature, the anguished face of Fritzjof, still alive, ingested by the fungoid mass and completely absorbed by it. His eyes seemed to implore me to destroy the still-living abomination which he had become, and his face was at peace before the final kiss of the flame effaced it for all time.

An even more fearful question had haunted my mind ever since, haunts it still.

"Supposing," I asked Masters, "the mountain did not destroy them when it fell? All the creatures, I mean. And that Karla and the others are still alive somewhere down there? If you can call it life. . . ."

There was a long silence between us. Then my old chief drummed with his fingers on the desk before him. The brittle sound seemed to conceal great emotion.

"It is best not to ask such questions or to think such thoughts," he said gently.

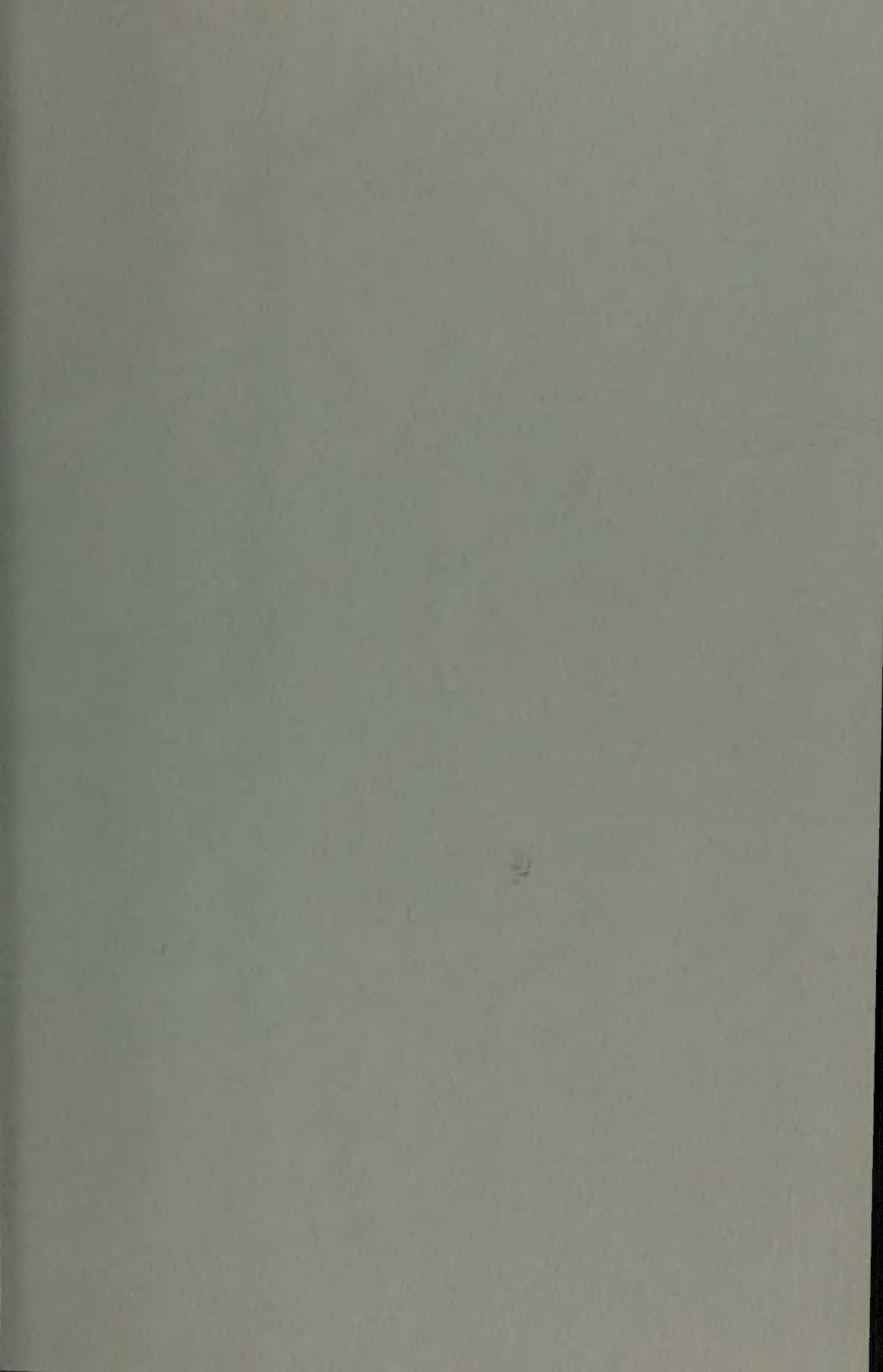
Masters turned to face the ghastly green phosphorescence of the sea. When he spoke again his voice seemed to come from a great distance.

"Who knows, my friend, who knows?" he said.



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BASIL COPPER (1924-) is a former journalist and newspaper editor who has written over fifty books and scripts, including nearly thirty novels featuring the California private detective, Mike Faraday. Copper's most important work is in the domain of the macabre and embraces such major collections as *Not After Nightfall*, *From Evil's Pillow*, *When Footsteps Echo*, and the science-fiction epic, *The Great White Space*. He is also the author of several Gothic novels, *The Curse of the Fleers* and *Necropolis*, two nonfiction studies, *The Vampire* and *The Werewolf*, and is presently preparing for publication a new series of Solar Pons stories, based on the character devised by August Derleth.

In addition to macabre literature, Copper's interests include swimming, gardening, travel, sailing, and historic film material. One of England's leading film collectors, his private archive contains almost one thousand titles. He is founder of the Tunbridge Wells Vintage Film Society and gives programs and talks to various film appreciation groups in London.

The publication in 1973 of his first Arkham House book, *From Evil's Pillow*, was ecstatically received by critics, who hailed him as "the best writer in the genre since H. P. Lovecraft." Basil Copper is perhaps the finest living scrivener in the grand tradition of classic British weird fiction, and his work in the genre embodies an almost magical evocation of the era of Machen and Blackwood.